A Thematic Comparison between
The Caretaker and *Endgame*

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Abstract

The cross comparison of the works of art has always been fascinating and has led to the discovery of many interesting ideas. Although much has been written on Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett's works, this paper introduces a comparative outlook of two of their works. Basing its approach on content analysis, the paper compares the theme of menace in *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter and *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett. We try to show how protagonists in both plays are afflicted by some sort of threat which is best justified by the manifestations of Pinter's *Comedy of Menace* which in the end results in Beckett's *Theatre of the Absurd*. One character is threatened by the nationally oriented fears of the system and the other harbingers an international atmosphere of menace hovering over the mind and soul of the protagonists at a micro level viewpoint and reflecting that of the postmodern man at a macro level one.

1. Introduction

Postmodern literature has been accompanied by many novel themes the greatest of which are mainly concerned with the existential obsessions of modern man. Postmodern dramatic literature is mainly known by the works of avant-garde writers like Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter which have best given rise to the emergence of theatre with idiosyncratic features and manifestations labelled the *Theatre of the Absurd* pioneered by Beckett and the *Comedy of Menace* attributed to Pinter.

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Although the term "the Theatre of the Absurd" was coined by Martin Esslin (1968), it is best characterized by the works of Samuel Beckett and his followers. At the same time, the sheer gist of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* can be the inspiration for the crystallization of the ideas prevalent in these great dramatists' works. The upside down condition of principles and doctrines in the postmodern era has led to the emergence of many existential obsessions which have proved to be unique to this age. One can see man at the mercy of strange ideas and unpredictable dangers and menaces as well as drastic affliction with giant melancholy and absurdity which has enriched and enhanced these common fear-arising attitudes. Many an intellectuals in diverse areas of science and art have tried to justify or settle down these widespread ideas and attitudes. Dramatists have proved to have illustrated and staged these fears better through the altered postmodern theatre. These dramatists transformed theatre in many possible aspects to tailor it towards the incorporation of ideas and themes to be developed and staged for the viewers or the readers. Language, characters, and settings were all altered to give rise to the reflection of the obsessions of the characters. What proved to be the major outcome of the going-to-getherness of all these dramatic elements was reflection of the unseen, illustration of the unfathomable, projection of the mental stream of thought, and revelation of the existential yearnings and fears.

This research has tried to highlight and detect the theme of *menace* in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. The hints, speeches, setting, and characters show the power of the two writers and their theatres in the reflection of this dominant threat of postmodernism which has turned out to be a Sword-of-Damocles threat for the postmodern man illustrated in these two plays.

2. Beckett & *Endgame*

Samuel Beckett, an outstanding 20th century literary figure, has contributed a lot to solving the existential problems of man through a

large number of oeuvres. Being familiar with all philosophical schools of thought and especially a proponent of existential philosophical movement, he was well aware of the characteristics of this school of thought and its underlying features.

Endgame is a one-act play in a bare skull-like room with two small windows, a blind man, Hamm, is sitting in a wheelchair. His servant, Clov, is standing. Hamm's legless Parents, Nagg and Nell, are in ashbins by the wall. It is the story of some catastrophe which has annihilated everything. Seemingly, they are the only survivors. *Endgame* manifests a running down mechanism until it stops. The setting is a skull-like revealing the fact that it may be the reflection of mind and its thoughts. The characters act as eyes and Clov is in charge of drawing back the curtains (the eyelids) and taking the dust sheet of Hamm (his removal of past negative reminiscences) for waking up in the morning and gazing upon another doomed day of this absurd life. In *Endgame* we are certainly confronted with a very

> powerful expression of deadness, of leaden heaviness and hopelessness, that is experienced in states of deep depression: the world outside goes dead for the victim of such states, but inside his mind there is ceaseless argument between parts of his personality that have become autonomous entities (Esslin, 1968: 69).

The first impression left on one for this may be due to the fear of loss of self through numbing sameness of day after day, but also the loss of self-worth through lack of love. Grandfather, grandmother, father, and son are immured together, but none is enjoying his expected respect and status. As one way of remuneration for this moral catastrophe, they try to merge in the form of pseudo-couples in the hope that they feel some degrees of comfort, respect, and complacency of one's sense of being together to reduce the menace of the imminent fear.

> There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us…Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a day stone on the beaten track of the years, and immediately part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely wearier because of yesterday; we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday (Beckett, 1931, pp. 2-3).

They are all at the mercy of these times hindering settings. This idea is repeated many times in the play.

> Clov: Something is taking its course.
> Hamm: All right, be off (*Endgame:* 14 & 32)
> Hamm (gloomily): Then it is a day like any other day.
> Clov: As long as it lasts (pause).All lifelong the same inanities. (*Endgame:* 33)
> Hamm (angrily): Keep going, can't you, keep going! (*Same:* 67)

Beckett's dramatic works 'point to an obvious failure in Western thought and culture' (Afroghe, 2010: 165). Beckett's reticence in shedding light on his philosophical concepts cannot be interpreted as a mere whim from critics' view point. Indeed, it might be argued that in correlation between the authors and the critics' attitude lies one of the keys to the whole phenomenon of Beckett, his oeuvres, and its impact. This great unpredictable, but totally certain phenomenon would happen and would put an end to the life of the human species making life and being absurd the for human being, fact which is best illustrated in the play. They feel being controlled by an anonymous phenomenon which is highly demanding on the characters' mind and soul. The skull-like setting and the paralyzed characters, as well as the running theme of threat of an imminent global danger would help out the nature of menace-stricken condition of the characters in the play.

In the present post-modern society, we find chaotic situations with gradual degradation of kinship, disobedience of children towards parents and teachers, fornication of married couples, drug addiction of the youth and suicide attempts by dismantling ideologies (Azam, 2014: 505).

Hamm: We're not beginning to…to…mean something?
Clov: Mean something! You and I mean something! (*Brief laugh*) Ah that's a good one.
Hamm: I wonder. (*Pause*) Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough […] and Clov (*vehemently*)
They fall into some sort of plant life without any hope and joy for the present and the future as if they are brainless and senseless. To think perhaps it won't all have been for nothing! (*Endgame:* 33)

This agitated mode of thinking and violated states of things exacerbated by the bizarre skull like shape of their shelter as well as the characters in the ashbin all indicate the past and the immediate chaos and entropy.

As Morgan has maintained, 'The concept of Entropy, of a world inhabited by chaos, is obvious when we come to analyze the speech of characters' (Morgan, 2008: 37). Setting and characterization are empowered by the power of language as the major tool which is easily manipulated available to the dramatist. 'Without a constant misuse of language, there cannot be any discovery and progress' (Feyerabend, 1992: 27).

Clov: Putting things in order. (*He straightens up fervently.*) I'm going to clear everything away! (*He starts picking up again*.)
Hamm: Order!
Clov: (*Straightening up*): I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last

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place, under the last dust. (*He starts picking up again*) (*Endgame:* 56)

The protagonists of most of Beckett's plays follow the same style of language as their way of expressing their obsessions, yearnings, and aspirations. Pozzo, the antagonist of *Waiting for Godot*, talks seriously and 'delivers a long, gabled monologue about the fate of man caught between an indifferent God and an inhospitable nature' (Patti, 2000: 75).

The altered utilization of language in its minimalized and colloquial style manoeuvering over meaningless and threatening words signify the reality of a sort of chaos-arisen absurdity. Philosophically speaking, Beckett's *Endgame*

> textualizes the subversion of the constancy of identity ('être-pour-soi') of the modern man who holds a dichotomous look on subject and object in his dominating view on the world. From this perspective, *Endgame* exudes an atmosphere of existential Angst which peaks in a potential way of being that prevails in the hope for an authentic life but yet at the same time falls in a cosmic exile that emanates from man's failure in his dominance over the world. (Shirvani, et. al., 2018: 145)

which has added to the uncertainty of human fate and this, in turn, has led to the devastating view of his life and being.

As we approach the end of the play, we see that Hamm has nothing to do. He sits and covers his face with a blood-stained handkerchief and Clov prepares to leave. Both are undetermined and in an ambivalent state which may be because they are afflicted by 'what starts as solipsism ends with those vague imitations of nuclear disaster which add to every one's anxieties in our time' (Lall, 1994: 60). This gets more obvious when we hear Hamm talking about his desolate room and the vague and futile condition of himself and his

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parents. 'It seems that the postmodern world is too dark where men can easily' (Azam, 2014: 505) get lost.

3. Pinter & *The Caretaker*

Harold Pinter, as one of the great followers of the Theatre of the Absurd, is best known for his *Comedy of Menace*. In his plays, "menace may show up in different ways including physical, psychological, and mental ways. Each one is manifested in its own special way." (Rahimipour, 2011: 594). He has highlighted existential obsessions of postmodernity mostly from a social and political angle. *The Caretaker* (1960) takes place in an old cluttered house. There are three characters. Aston, who has suffered a mental disease and has undergone electric shock in the hospital, rescues Davies in a battle in the restaurant and takes him home. Davies is a social vagrant who seemingly had left all his documents in the district of Sidcup fifteen years before and lives under an assumed name. Mick, a builder and sadistic type of person, owns the house and cannot get along with this intrusion; therefore, virtually and physically tries to terrorize Davies. Davies is offered a position as a caretaker by the two brothers. In the end, he is rejected by the two and ends up in the streets as before.

Pinter, in *The Caretaker* (1960), though exercising upon the elements of the Absurd, captures the theme of mystery and menace but with a smaller intensity. Therefore, his early drama is famous for the expression of the feelings of fear, restlessness, purposelessness, menace, ambiguity, selflessness as well as the entailment of the elements of absurdity. It can be clearly detected that Pinter's employment of the elements of absurd and comic serves the provision of the insight to his character's inner world not just the creation of a mere comic scene. The superficially comic subject matter turns sombre as 'more often than not the speech only seems to be funny – the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life' (Bensky, 2005: 63). Pinter's characters have dreamed of self-realization but they have been unable to pursue their dreams. Stanley has tried to be a profound pianist and time and again talks of his performance, if any, as if he is

leading his life under the same identity. Davies in *The Caretaker* claims to have been a man of noble position and prestige, but with nothing to prove it. Spooner, in *No Man's Land*, unlike his current working condition in a pub, claims to have been a literary man and a poet. To Pinter's protagonists what proves to be highly crucial and at the same highly susceptible to anonymous threat is their identity specially their social status. In *The Caretaker*, Davies turns to his past, if any, identity as a way of proving his current position in the society otherwise he is regarded as a social outcast. As far as the influence is concerned, Pinter stated that he read Kafka when he was eighteen, and that 'his work has left an incredible impression on him', seeing the nightmarish world of Kafka. 'This explains why a significant number of Pinter's early plays portray such nightmarish settings where incomprehensible occurrences whose past is unexplained take place' (Shammout, 2018: 42). The way he torture the characters resembles the way Beckett places the paralyzed characters in the ashbins with no respect, attitudes, and behaviour. They are fed up with each other and time and again call into question their own existence and being which may signify that they are survivors of an accident in a remote area who get frustrated and get involved in bitter verbal and physical quarrels. Similarly, in *The Caretaker* 'we come across a bucket hanging from the rain dripping ceiling, which has been analyzed as a prop used to caricature Chinese water torture used in horrific third degree police interrogations' (Shabbir Khan, 2016: 4)

> Aston: Welsh, are you?
> Davies: Eh?
> Aston: You Welsh? Pause.
> Davies. Well, I been around, you know… what I mean… I been about…
> Aston: Where were you born then?
> Davies: (darkly). What do you mean?
> Aston: Where were you born?

> Davies: I was… uh… oh, it's a bit hard, like, to see your mind back….see what I mean… going back… a good way... lose a bit of track, like… you know… (*The Caretaker:* 23)

Even their previous job position gives rise to the retention of this elusive and alluring identity.

> Mick: Well, you say you're an interior decorator; you'd better be a good one.
> Davies: A what?
> Mick: What do you mean, a what? A decorator. An interior decorator.
> Davies: Me? What do you mean? I never touched that. I never been that. (*The Caretaker:* 70)

The dialogues in the play reveal that this play is mainly concerned with the depiction of, 'power and powerless, both within personal relationships and between the individual and the authority of the state' (Baldwin, 2009: 6). *The Caretaker*, though concerned with the expression of the feeling of fear, ambiguity, and restlessness, includes the elements of absurdity, too. Therefore, we see that most of 'Pinter's plays begin comically but turn to physical, psychological or potential violence-sometimes, in varying sequences, to all three' (Dukore, 1988: 24).

> The opening line of *the Caretaker* follows this routine, too.

> Davies: 'If you hadn't come out and stopped that Scottish git, I'd be inside the hospital now.' (*The Caretaker*: 23)

> Davies characterizes 'psychological portrayal of individuals trying to create viable relationships with one another in attempts to fulfil the emotional needs which produce a threat to their welfare' (Gale, 2001: 19).

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The protagonist has tried to take refuge in whatever strategy to stabilize his being and threatened identity in his social relations.

> Davies: Don't you pull anything.
> Mick: No, you're still not understanding me. I can't help being interested in any friend of my brother's. I mean, you're my brother's friend, aren't you? (*The Caretaker*: 1)

'Violence taking place in the world became a huge concern for Pinter, and has provided images that inspired many of his later plays'. 'The result is that torture, oppression, and violence became pivotal to Pinter's political plays' (Shammout, 2018: 3).

Deploying the same elements of theatre like Beckett including setting, characterization, language, and elements of absurdity and menace, Pinter has tried to tailor theatre towards capturing his intended theme revelation. This is what Pinter has been getting at 'that despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unanswering, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all. It is in fact mandatory' (Pinter, 2006: 23). He speaks both as 'an outraged citizen appalled at our indifference to global cruelty and as a concerned father remembering his fears for his son's future; the present and the past' (Belington, 2007: 93). Hence, Pinter's Davies and Beckett's Clov turn to whatever language to put their ideas across but it bears no practical fruit.

> Davies: All them toe-rags, mate, got the manners of pigs. I might have been on the road a few years but you can take it from me I'm clean. I keep myself up. That's why I left my wife. Fortnight after I married her, no, not so much that, no more than a week, I took the lid off a saucepan, you know what was in it? A pile of her underclothing, unwashed. The

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pan for vegetables, it was. The vegetable pan (Pinter, 1960: 143).

4. Thematic comparison

The two great proponents of the Theatre of the Absurd have proved to be highly promising regarding the revelation of postmodern human conditions and obsessions. The two authors have tried to express their inner thought through the characters' behaviour. They have poured out their innermost feelings and wishes in diverse ways towards the plays protagonists, Clov and Davies respectively who are the real manifestation of the entire society advocating the nostalgia for the past glory and befuddled by the postmodern characteristics. Pinter states that 'the very isolated condition of Aston suggests the critical existence of man in the modern world, who may live life as mentally retarded person like Aston' (Patil, 2011: 1) resembling so many remaining war victims and war disable people recalling the war and obsessed by the threat of a new war illustrated by Beckett in *Endgame*. The two playwrights advocating other dramatists like Osborne 'search for a new dramatic idiom that is to express the contemporary mood of despair departs from the earlier formalistic kitchen-sink drama' (Meivizhi, 2017: 253).

Pinter mainly and Beckett, too have tried to deploy the text and the dramatic techniques to the fullest possible manner. What cries out as the gist of the two authors' obsession is the fact that to them both 'society, authorities and the world outside are the real threatening forces for any individual as these are the powers meant to destroy the individuality and personal vision of the individuals' (Figes, 2016: 72). Regarding Pinter 'the purpose of the textual analysis is to elucidate the technique that [he] employed to shape up his theme. The tension inherent in the language dynamics has been handled so adroitly by the dramatist that even the most banal conversation is put through linguistic devices of rhythm and beat, pauses and silences in order to work dramatic wonders with the language (Shabbir Khan, 2016: 46). The two playwrights have delicately uncovered the existing threat and

menace hovering over postmodern man in their introduced oeuvre. In the cases of Clov and Hamm in *Endgame* and Davies and Mick in *The Caretaker*, one can observe that their ongoing inner hatred came into existence by the imminent threat; additionally their bitter absurd language and attitude reveal the commonality of the two dramatists in the proper characterization. Hamm and Clov are fed up with each other, there is tangible hatred of Hamm's view towards Nagg and Nell in *Endgame*; Davies, Aston, and Mick are mentally afraid of each other and feel uneasy in each other's company in *The Caretaker* reflecting their inability to develop a proper human(e) link. They are unable to form an affectionate human relationship 'because of their sense of guilt and their isolated and disconnected lives' (Mahmoodi et al, 2013: 149) they are leading. *The Caretaker* deconstructs perceived notions and conceptions of reality, and disturbs the audiences' perception of their own identity and place within a world which is primarily concerned with the search and need for identity' (Singh, 2016: 166) and panicked to death harrowing condition of many postmodern men whose parallel condition can be detected in the shattered family of Nagg and Nill and the protagonist, their son. The threating figure of a bare skull, and the uncertain worn-out condition of Mick's house, the darkness and the harrowing uneasy atmosphere of the two plays reflect their idiosyncratic setting selection serving the same mode of panic-stricken characters or postmodern men. Pinter's plays are dominated by verbal and physical violence in which characters contend for positions of power. Mick's aggressive interaction acts as a dominance over miserable Davies who could not speak properly without uttering clichés and gigs. […] We come to know about the characters 'psychological realities depicted through the absurd events in the play such as fear, threat, terror, turmoil, depression, etc. It gives rise to dramatic tension that audience feel from characters' actions' (Mudasir, 2015: 30). The coding of the words in the two plays regarding the theme of the papers would lead to the clarification the ideas systematically. The subthemes of terror, panic, selflessness, and phobia

give rise to the development of restlessness and the subthemes of nothingness, futility, and hovering death would pave the way for absurdity respectively. The two subthemes would enhance the dominant theme of menace projected upon the mind and soul of the viewers and readers in the course of the two plays.

The great tool at the disposal of the two playwrights has been language. 'Beckett uses language to reflect the convoluted and unstructured nature of life, one that is neither comprehensible in the present nor ever will be' (Michelle Bui, Jaime Roots, 2016: 7). Pinter, too, hanging on the same linguistic tool, takes it to the threshold of sheer nonsense one which to the audience makes no sense at first. The analysis of the characters' speeches in both plays reveals that 'the structures of language are marked with social imperatives –the Father's definitions, orders, laws and taboos' (Chen, 2013: 581) implicating that 'the absurdist playwrights use shallow and incoherent language intentionally in order to represent the baseless life of people. There is no deep philosophy and meaning in the conversation of the characters in *The Caretaker*. The dialogues are trivial and motiveless' (Khan & Larik, 2018: 4).

The wishy-washy state of the setting in *The Caretaker*, a sheer chaotic house, as well as the skull-like room of *Endgame*, the shabby, dislocated, and identity less characters harmonize with the chaotic language of the plays whose coding is introduced briefly and which enable the playwrights to deal with the existential obsessions of the postmodern man in their theatre. Such settings forms the very basic cells of the society and its structure indicating that the 'society, authorities and the world outside are the real threatening forces for any individual as these are the powers meant to destroy the individuality and personal vision of the individuals' (Jamil, 2014: 82).

Text	Main Code	Subcode	Detailed Code	Implicating Thematic Code	
The Caretaker	absurdity	language	example: minimalized language	existential obsessions:	global threat
		setting	messy-chaotic room		
		characterization	1-Davies, a vagrant 2-an insane person called Aston 3- an ambitious person Mick		
	menace	language	threatening		local threat
		setting	café & the bitter quarrel		
		characterization	vicious characters in the café		

Table 1. *Themes and coding in 'The Caretaker'*

Text	Main Code	Subcode	Detailed Code	Implicating Thematic Code	
Endgame	absurdity	language	minimalized, meaningless, & absurd language	existential obsessions:	global threat
		setting	skull-like room		
		characterization	1-an old couple, Nagg & Nell 2- a man in the		

			wheelchair, Hamm 3- A younger person, Clov		
	menace	language	condemning, threatening, horrible speeches		local threat
		setting	isolated & shabby room with two windows on the left and right		
		characterization	mental and physical, paralyzed, & deserted characters		

Table 2. *Themes and coding in 'Endgame'*

Conclusions

When judging the contribution of art and artist, one can see that 'the postmodern artist and writer are in the position of a philosopher; the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by re-established rules and they cannot be judged according to determining judgment, applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for' (Francois, 1979: 181). Through the cross comparison of the two major works of Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, the research via the reflection on the two works and the extracts of the plays as well as the coding of words and expressions leading to subthemes and finally implicating the major theme revealed the fact the two playwrights in their works have tried to highlight the theme of locally and globally emerged menace as one of the great

existential obsessions of postmodern man. Rehman (cited in Raees Khan & Hair Muhammad Larik, 2018: 4) states in this regard; Absurd Dramas discards pragmatism and realism in their settings and consequently deconstruct reality by a constant employment of nonsense, ambiguous and absurd language, which fits all current environment of irrational and illogical reasoning.

This comparative study presented an outlook of the ideas of the two leading playwrights to show that these two and other avant-garde playwrights share this common mode of presentation as their artistic goal via the lens of dramatic literature.

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