

## **Society's Role in Creating Neurotics: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Pinter's The Caretaker**

**Jeffrey Figes**

### **ABSTRACT**

*In contemporary world, we often confront the incidents when people fall sick mentally and suffer from behavioral and personality disorders. The present research paper seeks to point out the reasons behind neurotic disorder with special reference to social aspect of individuals' life, considering society and authorities as driving forces behind almost every neurosis by applying Freud's psychoanalytic theory of neurosis (but with a little deviation) upon the dramatic persona created by Pinter in The Caretaker (1960). It has been attempted to analyze and interpret the text with Freudian perspective in order to unwrap society's monstrous role in creating neurotic disorder in individuals by pressurizing them to repress themselves in certain ways.*

**KEY WORDS:** Freud, Individual, Neurotic disorder, Repressed unconscious, Society.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Understanding of psychoanalysis, with its double identity of being a theory as well as a therapy to cure mental diseases is the fundamental tool to equip with in order to explore the metaphorical world of Pinter's drama. As it has been said: "Freud's theory, psychoanalysis suggested new ways of understanding amongst other things, love, hate, childhood, family relations and the conflicting emotions" (Thurshwell, 2000, p. 1). His innovative and revolutionized assumptions about unconscious part of human mind in fact are the basis for interpretative study of human mind as well as of literary text. About how Freud gives extra

ordinary importance to unconscious, Thurschwell opines, “For Freud, everything is unconscious before it is conscious” (Thurschwell, 2000, p. 11). As a literary theory it aims to explore the hidden of literary texts and fictive persons. It offers more and more possibilities to unfold the hidden motives behind the actions action done by any character or the author himself / herself. Eagleton considers psychoanalysis: “Secondary revision” to expose something of the “sub text” (Eagleton, 1996, p. 158).

Termed by Cullen (1769), neurosis is a sort of inability to adapt to one’s environment, one’s inability to change one’s life patterns, and the inability to develop a satisfying personality. Russon defines neurosis: “The way a tension – frustration of desire – is structured into our very approach to things” (Russon, 2003, p. 126). He further explains neurosis by saying that “The neuroses mark the inability to coordinate the sectors of habitual life coherently” (Russon, 2003, p. 93). Discussing the symptoms of neurosis Fenichel is of the view: “All symptoms give the impression of something that seems to break in upon the personality from unknown source” (Fenichel, 1999, p. 16). Telling us about the reasons behind individuals’ neurotic disorder Boeree writes, “Predisposing physiological conditions... One’s culture... triggering stressors in people’s lives which led to the various emotional, behavioral and cognitive symptoms of neurosis” ([www.webspaceship.edu](http://www.webspaceship.edu)). So, society and culture through repressions put by them are there behind abnormalities in contemporary people. Eagleton point out towards this very fact: “These are the cultural, political and economic sphere of life...that lead a man towards disorder” (Eagleton, 1996, p. 167).

Pinter in his plays, projects quite appropriately the disturbed and disordered condition of modern individuals. In Pinter’s *The Caretaker* (1960), Aston is the most visible neurotic and a pure example of a person damaged by the society. His crime was only to be indifferent towards society for which he was punished. It has been observed by analyzing the character sketch of Aston that society does not treat its causalities perhaps, in Aston it creates them.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Plenty of critical works have been written so far about Pinter’s *The Caretaker* (1960) specifying psychological issues regarding his characters in the implicated play. But it has been observed that critics so far have not analyzed the selected play with specific application of psychoanalytic theory of neurosis. So, it is valuable to interpret the character sketch of Aston drawn by Pinter with special reference to neurotic disorder as the character is rich enough to be studied under the concerned term.

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.

In an interview when Pinter was asked why his characters are in room and for what they are afraid of? Pinter replied, “Obviously they are scared of that is out side the room. Out side the room there is a world bearing upon them which is frightening. I am sure it is frightening to you and me as well” (Pinter as cited in Esslin, 1980, p. 235).

Gillen quite realistically exhibits society’s wild intentions in destroying individual vision of people: “Whether they use brain –shock therapy or force, the goal is always the same: to destroy the individual’s belief in himself and his own vision of life”. He further brings to light the torturous role of society and authorities by saying that their plan is to “make him (individual) doubt himself by placing impossible demands upon him and thus reduce him to an automaton” (Gillen, 1983, p. 94). Aston in *The Caretaker* (1960) has been a portrayal of a victimized person, whom society has crushed by enforcing brain operation upon him. Burkman presents Aston: “A victim of society, and of his own mother, whose permission was needed for the operation. Aston failed to make his escape” (Burkman, 1971, p. 80). Pinter himself terms *The Caretaker* (1960) as a story of victimization while saying, “*The Caretaker* is yet another study in victimization-mental (Aston, with his psychiatric history), physical (Mick, leather-jacketed and unpredictably violent), emotional (Davies, the elderly tramp)” (Pinter as cited in Innes, 2002, p. 339). Society’s tyrannical nature has also been brought to light by Patil: “(The) so-called society does not allow him to be the part and parcel of society. Therefore, Aston is forced to lead isolated life and the character like him is given inferior treatment in society” ([www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)).

Aston on being artistic minded was less beneficial for society, so, the mundane society dashed the artist to ground. Esslin remarks: “Aston is the poet whom society crushes under the weight of its machinery of legal forms and bureaucracy. His hallucinations, his clear visions having been wiped from his brain” (Esslin, 1980, p. 251).

Review of the previous literature can be concluded in the words of Innes: “(The) socially accepted normality is discredited by his revelation that electric shock therapy has left him a mental cripple”. Further he considers the impact of social oppression on the mind and life of individuals by saying: “The shocking nature of the process that has reduced Aston to conformity implies that social conditioning is the equivalent of political oppression” (Innes, 2002, p. 340).

## **THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

Methodologically, as psychoanalytic theory suggests, it is an interpretative and critical analysis of Pinter’s *The Caretaker* (1960), seeking to uncover society and the authorities behind individual neurosis. After applying Freudian model of neurosis on the selected text, the relevant

extracts have been demonstrated to strengthen the view point that individual neurosis is the product of materialistic societies. The analysis of the relevant extracts of the text reveals the oppressive and authoritative forces that lead individuals towards abnormalities like neuroses.

Theoretically, Freud's theory of repressed unconscious that resultantly leads towards neurosis/neurotic disorder serves as theoretical background of the present study. Freud considers repressed desire for sexuality at the bottom of individual neurosis but at the same time he admits the importance of social and economic spheres of life as well. To believe blindly sexuality behind every neurosis will perhaps be a drastic fault / misconception as psychologically the basic needs of human beings are to be fed and to be protected. Human relations in fact are greatly determined by the irrational authority either parental or social. So, irrational authority can be discovered here as the root cause of individual neurosis. Freud admits the fact that it is the practical aspect of life or "*reality principle*" which crushes the individuality of the individuals when he makes statement: "Pleasure principle indeed under the influence of the external world changed into the more modest reality principle" (Freud, 1962, p. 24). Freud also explains how societies and civilizations are cultivating disorders in human beings while saying: "Under the influence of some cultural urges some civilizations...possibly the whole mankind has become neurotic" (Freud, 1962, p.91).

## ANALYSIS

For Freud, alienation of contemporary individual from his / her fellow beings, environment, relationships and life is a sure symptom of neurosis. He explains this point by saying: "In an individual neurosis we take as our starting point the contrast that distinguishes the patient from his environment, which is assumed to be 'normal'" (Freud, 1962, p. 91). Let us analyze, up to what extent Pinter's creation, Aston, in *The Caretaker* (1960) can be termed a neurotic whom society has ruined for his artistic vision. *The Caretaker* (1960) is one of the most appealing and most discussed works by Pinter and an example of realist theatre. In the play, Mick says, "Every word you speak is open to any number of interpretations" (Pinter, 1960, p. 71). Pinter has perhaps given this statement about his own words indirectly as it has been observed that though Pinter and his characters apparently seem to be indifferent towards any social and political issue throughout the play but the in-depth study and analysis throws light on the whole social, economic and political scenario. All the three characters in *The Caretaker* (1960) are one way or the other in search of their identities so; all at certain levels are facing neurotic disorder. The failure of characters against the powerful society and system results in shattered and disordered personalities. Burkman points out towards this very point while saying, "In some respects, the three characters in *The Caretaker* (1960) are all dispossessed, all in search of their identity papers in a materialistic world" (Burkman, 1971, p. 86). Pinter reveals the disgusting role of society and authorities in making people neurotic side by side exposing their

cruel treatment towards those neurotics. According to Stephen, “In Davies, Pinter shows his audience how society treats its rejects; in Aston, he shows them how it creates them” (Stephen, 1981, p. 44).

Aston, can be the best example out of all the three characters in the play *The Caretaker* (1960) who can aptly be termed as neurotic. When the play opens, the scene projected before the audience is Aston’s room. The mess and scrambled condition of the room can be symbolized to the jumbled and chaotic thoughts of the person living in that room. Stephen describes the same idea when he says, “The room also acts as an emblem for the state of Aston’s mind. It is full of ‘cobbler’ and ‘junk’, a bizarre mixture of valuable and valueless items, unorganized and in disarray” (Stephen, 1981, p. 45).

Besides muddled thoughts, Aston’s appearance before the audience is not only showing his adverse circumstances, but his conformity also. The suit worn out by Aston is the dress that patients are given to wear in hospitals, and this is a sign of conformity. “Aston wears...a thin shabby dark-blue pinstripe suit” (Pinter, 1960, p. 5). Stephen observes and describes this point by saying, “Aston...wears a shabby pinstriped suit that was given to him at the hospital. This form of clothing is often associated with conformity and respectability”. (Stephen, 1981, p. 51).

By giving him a uniform, the authorities have attempted to change his state of mind from non-conformist to a conformist which was suitable for authorities.

Throughout the play, we find Aston busy with his screw drives, plugs, and electrics. He makes nothing out of his tools, does nothing worthwhile in reality with the electric machines but just keeps himself busy all the time in such activities. It symbolizes Aston’s failure not only in fixing up the plug but also his failure to communicate and make relations with others in spite of all his efforts. Gabbard views this situation by saying, “The electric plug that Aston is forever probing is also symbolic of his experience”. Further he says that, “The shock treatment of the fiendish prank, real or imagined, is connected in his mind with electricity – pincers. Aston is forever trying to mend his plug, make it work again; undo the damage was done” (Gabbard, 1976, p. 107).

Aston is unable to communicate properly with Davies. Most of the time he talks too less and gives very short answers and some times there are long speeches showing Aston’s inner distorted condition. His speech lacks coherence and fluency. His response to Davies’ questions is most of the time quite un-understandable like;

DAVIES: How many Blacks you got around here then?

ASTON: What?

DAVIES: You got any more Blacks around here?

ASTON: (holding out the shoes). See if these are any good (Pinter, 1960, p.12).

This failure of communication is on account of Aston's inability to link his thoughts together properly. Aston throughout the play remains unpredictable and a strange personality. We see Aston most of the time planning to go out of the room into the fresh air. This makes us feel that he feels himself burdened and wants to get relief and relaxation through fresh air, even in severe cold he is unable to sleep without opening windows of his room.

All the factors mentioned earlier about Aston's personality represent him as an ambiguous character until he delivers a long speech at the end of act (ii), in which the conflict is finally brought to light. Aston's speech uncovers not only the role of society and its impact on Aston's personality, but it also brings the readers and audience closer to Aston and makes them feel the agony and pain in which Aston is living. The mystery is resolved finally and reality is quite open before us in Aston's speech. This speech throws light on Aston's strange personality and behavior which represents him to be a neurotic as well as it is exhibiting the whole scenario of the reasons behind his neurotic disorder. Aston tells, "ASTON. I used to go there quiet a bit. Oh, years ago now. But I stopped...I want to build that shed out in the garden" (Pinter, 1960, pp. 52-55).

It is only through this speech that we come to know that how society is responsible for bringing disorder in Aston's personality. His thoughts during the speech are scattered and disturbed and expose dissociation of his personality clearly. This speech exposes the ruthlessness of contemporary societies towards individuals. It tells us how the so-called society shows its unwillingness for artistic persons, who are of less or no economic pursuit for it. Aston's crime was just that he used to speak too much. Stephen brings Aston's character before us by saying, "He (Aston) talked to people, and talked too much. He could have been a political revolutionary, an industrial activist, or simply a dissident, someone not prepared to accept immediately and without question what society asked him to believe". Then further Stephen exposes the vicious schemes made by society and its enforcement of brain operation upon him. He says, "His operation can thus be seen as society's retribution, and a symbol of the fear in which it holds the person who is a potential threat to it. Any such threat must be cruelly and immediately destroyed, in this case by taking away Aston's ability to think" (Stephen, 1981, p. 44).

The real dilemma exposed through this speech is that society is not even ready to let anyone speak according to one's own will and wishes. This civilized society is such barbarous in nature that it cannot tolerate people who are of less support for it. It is through this speech that we come to know about the futility of interrelationships. Aston tells us how his mother along with the wicked authorities of the society and hospital plotted against him to destroy his subjective vision.

Aston's questioning nature proved to be a threat for his own self because the savage society and its representatives are not going to give anyone the right to bring any changes in the pre-established system. Patil considers this point while saying, "As it was dangerous to the society,

his (Aston's) questioning ability was hampered by electric shock therapy...Then Aston not only loses questioning ability but also fails even to communicate properly" ([www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)).

Aston tells how society considered and confirmed him a mad, and then decided to operate just in order to get rid of his speaking habit. He has been subjected rather destroyed by the society in order to make him a harmless person for society. Gillen exposes cruel intentions behind society's action by saying, "Both Len in *The Dwarfs* and Aston in *The Caretaker* are subjected, like Lamb, to electrical brain-shock treatment until they are delivered from their personal vision of reality which the social order deems hallucinations" (Gillen, 1983, p. 94).

He further tells about his past life when he used to be a normal human being. But with the terrible brain operation his personal vision was brought to an end, and the reason behind this tyrannical treatment towards Aston was his habit of talking too much. His clear vision was made opaque by operating upon his brain. Prentice tells how, "Aston, like Davies and Mick, cherishes illusions about himself. He believes he once had but has now lost clear vision and an ability to talk to other people easily" (Prentice, 2000, p. 89).

Aston tells us how he was once able to think properly and make decisions according to his own will and wish. His individual vision was the most precious thing he had, but he has now lost his mental capability, vision and identity even. Gabbard says, "He once saw things very clearly, had hallucinations; these phrases suggest that Aston witnessed the primal scene". Further he tells how he was destroyed and silenced by the authorities. Gabbard puts this point into words by saying, "When he made the mistake of talking about it, "They" silenced him. "They" carried him away and gave him a mental shock that left him unable to think and unwilling to talk" (Gabbard, 1976, p. 107).

As Aston's speech moves towards its end, gradually darkness prevails until every thing except Aston gets dark and invisible. This can be the true projection of Aston's life after that brain operation. Society damaged him and brought his life into the darkness by enforcing that vicious brain-operation on Aston. He is unable to think now, his creativity has been smashed. Now the situation is that although Aston is alive physically but he is dead and finished mentally and internally. According to Prentice, "Aston was silenced, mentally destroyed, castrated" (Prentice, 2000, p. 107).

As a result of that operation, anger is expressed through Aston's hatred and alienation towards society, and this resulting alienation is shown through his behavior towards Davies. Although he himself brings the old tramp into his room and gives him place to live in but unable to demolish the wall of strangeness built by the society between him and the other members of society. Prentice says, "It's difficult for him but he makes an attempt to be friendly and it just

doesn't work" (Prentice, 2000, p. 86).

Finally, Aston is ready to pay the society back in the same coin. He decides to throw the old tramp (Davies) away, who is a representative of society. He brought him in a frosty night to give him shelter, and now is going to expel him in the same severe cold and at last the moment comes where Aston is totally a stranger and cruel to the old tramp as if he never knew him. How society can expect some thing grand from him as he is going to do what was done to him. This can also be a symptom of neurosis in Aston's personality that he has left the society and is now ready to create his own new world. Prentice suggests, "Having once been crucified by society, he is unwilling to be crucified again" (Prentice, 2000, p. 80).

Aston has been made isolated and alienated and the responsibility is upon the terrible brain operation done by the members of the threatening society in order to bring him in peace with others. Patil argues that, "Aston's isolation is the result of his too much trust on others in society. Aston's isolation is not the fault of him but of the society" ([www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)).

After the detailed and in depth analysis of the text and character sketch of Aston, one thing becomes clear that Aston is living somewhere at distance from the boundaries of normal psychological realm. He fails to communicate, fails to make relationships on individual as well as on social level. It further exposes that whatever he is, he is the product of the system and the society. So, society one way or the other is leading people towards neurotic disorder not only in Aston's but in real life as well.

## CONCLUSION

After analysing and interpreting *The Caretaker* (1960) by Pinter with the view point given by Freud (1962), the present research concludes that human individuality is at stake by the hands of the authoritative societies. The mental breakdown and disorders in individuals cannot be studied and understood by keeping the social aspect of individuals life aside. The modern society in which we are living as well as Aston's society, seems to be working with the objective of making us all conformists. It enforces conformism with such force that individual, feels himself / herself helpless to confront it due to his / her limitations. These limitations and helplessness turn the individual into an alien and stranger who is captivated by the powers beyond his control. The circumstances of a person if unfavourable they are, shatter and dissociate his personality. It is the story of an individual, who has fears from the hostile world, where his individuality is not secure even. Minogue points out, "We have all left our references and papers somewhere. We mostly feel we have "cards of identity" somewhere even more inaccessible than Sidcup". Here Sidcup has become such a place which is impossible to reach. Minogue says, "Sidcup seems to derive from the same myth-making impulse as the Garden of Eden, where we mislaid our innocence



and our nobility, but if the weather would break, we might dash back and get them” (Minogue, 1960, p. 72).

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