"The Examination," a short story by Pinter published in 1959, describes a cyclic change of power not unlike the action of Pinter's dramas. The narrator, who begins as the examiner, ends as the examined; and it is hinted that the exchange of power is continuous. The narrator was previously the examined, and Kullus was the examiner; the narrator then took over as examiner, and at the end of the story the wheel has turned once more.

The power struggle in the story remains mysterious and abstract; the object of the examination and the content of it are never specified. The narrator dwells, rather, on his examination technique, one that involves particular arrangements of the room and intervals given him by Kullus. These intervals are periods of silence that differ from
Kullus's other silences which form a part of the examination. "And so," the narrator explains, "the nature of our silence within the frame of our examination, and the nature of our silence outside the frame of our examination, were entirely opposed."2

While the nature of the examination is mysterious, the battle for dominance is defined by the silences; the narrator loses his dominance when he cannot follow Kullus's journey with understanding "from silence to silence" (p. 90). One is reminded of the defeat of Edward by the silent matchseller of A Slight Ache and of the fullness of silence in the frequent pauses of Pinter's dramatic world.

The struggle for control in "The Examination" is also defined significantly by the setting; the narrator is confident of his dominance because he has arranged the room, which is his. When they were in Kullus's room, the narrator explains, he was subject to Kullus's arrangement of window and curtain and, hence, subject to Kullus. Back in his own room, the tables are turned. "Yet I was naturally dominant, by virtue of my owning the room; he having entered through the door I now closed" (p. 91). When Kullus begins to dictate silences rather than accepting them as given intervals, the narrator begins to play the role of the examinee, a switch that again is reflected by change of place. "For we were now in Kullus' room" (p. 94).

The ritual transfer of power in Pinter's dramatic world almost always focuses on a room or a defined territory that must be protected or gained at all costs. Even as the priest of Nemi guards the tree and the Golden Bough knowing that his life is at stake, so the characters in Pinter's dramas battle for possession of place. "Two people in a room" Pinter once said, "—I am dealing a great deal of the time with this image of two people in a room. The curtain goes up on the stage, and I see it as a very potent question; What is going to happen to these two people in a room? Is someone going to open the door and come in?"3
Whether the living space in a Pinter drama is a place to hide (The Room and The Birthday Party) or a place to cling to with all the identification of self with room (A Slight Ache), it has all the ritual importance in Pinter's world of Frazer's Oak bearing the Golden Bough. Until the contender to the priesthood of Nemi plucked the Golden Bough from the tree, he was no threat to the reigning priest. Frazer's explanation for this aspect of the ritual is that the god of the sky may actually have dwelt in the reigning priest and dwelt in the Golden Bough as well. The priest-king may have "personated in flesh and blood" the god and guarded "with drawn sword the mystic bough which contained the god's life and his own." The importance of Pinter's settings to the characters who dwell in them, the way in which these rooms become battlegrounds for possession, and their key place in the cyclic transfers of power that are often at the plays' centers is but further indication of the archetypal and ritual patterning of Pinter's dramatic world.

Robert Ardrey traces man's attitudes toward space even further back than his primitive beginnings. In his book The Territorial Imperative, Ardrey postulates an instinctive drive or inward compulsion "to defend an area of space" as man's biological inheritance from the animal world. This compulsion for space is connected, in Ardrey's theory, with man's basic needs for identity, stimulation, and security. Whether such an instinct for space is indeed our biological inheritance as Ardrey suggests, or whether our attitudes toward space are culturally determined, Pinter's plays seem to dramatize the "territorial imperative" as it works itself out in terms of man's deepest needs.

In Pinter's dramatic world, then, setting works on many levels. It is nearly always realistically detailed, but its poetic undertones and ritual base lend it aspects of a symbolically mythical reality. Pinter's realistic characters move in these settings at once on the level of sheer animality, vivid embodiments of Ardrey's territorially compulsive
man evolved from animal, as well as on the level of sacred mystical reality. Man is seen as both animal and god.

The battle for possession of place and for self-possession shifts its focus from play to play in Pinter’s dramatic world. The playwright dwells on a young man’s identity crisis in terms of his room in his radio play The Dwarfs; he shifts focus in The Room to a woman’s fears of dispossession and her secret desire for it. He views the battle for possession in terms of a cyclic exchange of power in the television drama The Basement, in terms of the battle of the sexes in the television drama Night School, and in terms of a class war in the film The Servant. Focus is on the already dispossessed in the revue sketches; and Pinter’s second major work, The Caretaker, is almost entirely worked out in terms of its setting and the battle for possession. The scapegoat figure still predominates in these radio, television, film, and stage plays, as Pinter explores victim-victor relationships; but the importance of the setting to the characters becomes paramount.

The need for space is clearly related to the need for identity in Pinter’s drama The Dwarfs (1960), a radio play based on an unpublished autobiographical novel. The central character, a young man in his thirties, undergoes an identity crisis reminiscent of Edward’s crisis in A Slight Ache, but more adolescent in nature. Edward’s crisis meant total dispossession from his home, which reflected himself; Len’s crisis is dramatized in terms of his wavering sense of place. Like a child trying to locate himself, Len dwells on elements in his room.

There is my table. This is a table. There is my chair. There is my table. That is a bowl of fruit. There is my chair. There are my curtains. There is no wind. It is past night and before morning. There is the coal-scuttle. This is my room. This is a room. There is the wall-paper, on the walls. There are six walls. Eight walls. An octagon. This room is an octagon.¹

Len battles for a sense of existence in an hour between times: “It is past night and before morning.” He tries to
put the fragments of the room together to form a shape even as he tries to integrate his fragmented self. "Look at your face in this mirror," he demands of his friend Mark, who is but another facet of himself. "Look. It's a farce. Where are your features? You haven't got any features. You couldn't call those features. What are you going to do about it, eh? What's the answer?" (p. 93).

Len clings to his room, to its elements, for security, but the room eludes him.

This room moves. This room is moving. It has moved. It has reached . . a dead halt. The light on my skull places me in a manacle. This is my fixture. There is no web. All's clear, and abundant. Perhaps a morning will arrive. If a morning arrives, it will not destroy my fixture, nor my luxury. If it is dark in the night or light, nothing obtrudes. I have my compartment. All is ordered, in its place, no error has been made. I am wedged. Here is my arrangement, and my kingdom. There are no voices. They make no hole in my side. (Whispering.) They make a hole, in my side. (Silence.) (P. 88)

The imagery of The Dwarfs, more a poem than a play, once more reveals the scapegoat figure trying desperately to assess and hold his kingdom. Pinter denies any specific reference to Christ in Len's "hole in the side," but the image is highly suggestive as Len's room becomes a kingdom and Len becomes the dying god-king who is later reborn.

You're trying to buy and sell me. You think I'm a ventriloquist's dummy. You've got me pinned to the wall before I open my mouth. You've got a tab on me, you're buying me out of house and home, you're a calculating bastard. Both of you bastards, you've made a hole in my side, I can't plug it! (Pause.) I've lost a kingdom. (P. 97)

The battle for possession of self, then, is enacted in The Dwarfs as a battle for possession of place, with Len's kingdom at stake. The images are reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's poetic world, with Len as a Prufrock figure who feels "pinned to the wall" or a hollow man who dwells among the dwarfs in their wasteland.
What are the dwarfs doing? They stumble in the gutters and produce their pocket watches. One with a face of chalk chucks the dregs of the daytime into a bin and seats himself on the lid. (P. 94)

The play also has Eliot's sense of salvation from the wasteland—though not in the poet's specific Christian terms—in Len's emergence from his ordeal with a feeling of new life. Recovering from his illness in the hospital, Len senses that the dwarfs are deserting him.

And this change. All about me the change. The yard as I know it is littered with scraps of cat's meat, pig bollocks, tin cans, bird brains, spare parts of all the little animals, a squelching squealing carpet, all the dwarfs' leavings spittled in the muck, worms stuck in the poisoned shit heaps, the alleys a whirlpool of piss, slime, blood, and fruit juice. Now all is bare. All is clean. All is scrubbed. There is a lawn. There is a shrub. There is a flower. (P. 108)

As the new flower emerges from the decay of the dwarfs' wasteland, Len is reborn. There are echoes of the dying king fertility ritual that patterns A Slight Ache and that concerns Eliot in his poetry; but here Pinter seems focused more on the ordeal of the young—the initiation ritual on which Eliade dwells, in which the young man undergoes a ceremonial death and is reborn into the mythically real world. Len emerges from his ordeal with a new kingdom.

Perhaps because The Dwarfs is Pinter's most subjective play, the sense of place in it is largely described. In The Room (1957), his first play and one, unlike The Dwarfs, not tied to material from a novel, place functions in a far more dramatic way to enhance the meaning of the play's ritual action.

Rose, the central character, is unsure of her place, her room, just as Len is unsure of his room and himself in The Dwarfs. The room itself does not change as Len's room does, but all without the room is vague and uncertain.
“No, this room’s all right for me. I mean, you know where you are. When it’s cold, for instance” (p. 96), Rose assures her husband Bert. What lies out in the cold, however, and what lies outside the room in the very house she lives in are baffling questions to Rose. She wonders who lives in the basement with its damp walls (foreigners, perhaps), who lives in the house, how it is laid out, and whether it is full. A visit from the landlord only underlines her uncertainty, for Mr. Kidd, amusingly enough, has lost count of the number of floors and contradicts himself by informing Rose that the house is full shortly after telling her the upstairs people have gone.

The arrangements in the house become more, rather than less, mysterious as Mr. and Mrs. Sands arrive looking for the landlord, but not for Mr. Kidd. The couple assure Rose that it is as dark inside as out, that they have been in the yet darker basement, and that a man in the basement has told them that the vacant room in the house is the very one they have come to.

Rose’s fear of dispossession is thus increased before the blind Negro emerges from the basement to summon her home. Her initial fear of the Negro and her defiance of him, followed by her acceptance and apparent recognition of him, do much to establish Riley as at least an emissary from Rose’s father. One may read the subsequent fight between husband and Negro as a fight between husband and father.

The woman receives the blind Negro as a father and her husband stamps him to death as a father-rival. The woman turns to the father, who calls her by her secret love name, because her husband does not speak to her at all and breaks his silence only to chant a love song to his truck.¹¹

This psychological reading of the play is enhanced when we see Rose stricken with the Negro’s blindness at the play’s end. It is Bert, her husband, who has been the true
enemy, not the feared stranger in the basement who is no stranger at all. The Negro, Riley, may even be Rose's own buried thoughts emerging from the depths of the house and her own unconscious mind, thoughts she has wished to avoid. Her husband's attack on Riley, then, is an attack on her own deepest wishes to desert him. Rose's fear of dispossession finally appears as a fear of her deepest desires, the wishes of Flora in *A Slight Ache* for a "new" old man.

The conclusion of *The Room* has been much criticized for its melodrama; the blind Negro is identified by Taylor as a possible left-over from "those gloomy Carné-Prevért films on which Pinter says he doted in his early twenties." Although the *agon* between Bert and the black Riley at the play's end is rather abrupt and Pinter is undoubtedly a more subtle master of his craft in later dramas, *The Room* is still a completely coherent dramatic statement. As in Pinter's other early plays, *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*, the central character is viewed as victim. (In a later play, *The Homecoming*, Rose as Ruth succeeds in going home and becomes a more complex victim-victor; see chapter 5.) Torn between the pull of a silent, brutal husband whom she mothers and a call to return home as the child Sal, Rose is a victim of her own fears and of her husband.

The play is coherent, however, only when its seemingly incoherent setting is understood. The apparent contradictions and uncertainties about the house are obscure on a realistic level but clear on a psychological and ritual level. The house reflects Rose's mind; its uncertain outlines reflect her uncertain sense of identity even as Len's room eluded him with its movement in *The Dwarfs*. Its depths, the basement, send up the intrusion into her fixed life, her room; and she is dispossessed of her security, forced to face her deepest wishes just as Edward faces himself in the mute matchseller. Finally, it is Bert, not Rose, who will not allow intrusion; and the squabbling couple who visit Rose
are a comic version of the larger battle between Rose and Bert. The contender for the priesthood is defeated, however, in *The Room*, and the Golden Bough is intact.

The contender for the priesthood is victorious in *The Basement* (1967), and here setting is emphasized even more than character; the play develops with the ritual rigor of "The Examination" as a cyclic change of place reveals a cyclic change of power. Stott and his girlfriend Jane take over Law's basement apartment in this television drama, but there is a suggestion that the apartment was once Stott's. The play develops as a battle between Law and Stott for possession, with seasonal and scenic changes reflecting the gradual ascendency of the intruder. As the seasons move, Stott imposes his taste on the room, and Jane endeavors to seduce Law (there is some indication that she had once lived there alone with him). Law, however, denounces Jane to Stott. "She's a savage. A viper," he informs him, "she sullies this room." A final fight between the men in a now barren room results in an apparent victory for Stott; the final tableau reveals Law and Jane outside the door of the apartment, endeavoring to intrude and begin the cycle again. The woman is clearly a source of competition between the men, but in this drama, at least, the woman goes to the loser of the major battle for place. She is not in any way first prize.

Woman is not first prize either in the television drama *Night School* (1960), in which the battle for possession of place occurs between a man and a woman. Wally, a young man who returns from prison, finds that his aunts have rented his room to a young lady. Both Wally and Sally allow their need for the room to interfere with their attraction to each other, and they indulge in identity pretenses that end in keeping them apart. Wally gets his room back, but it costs him Sally's love. One is reminded of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, in which the playwright suggests on a far more tragic level the destructive hunger
for place as security that can rob man of love, pitting father against son, husband against wife, lover against lover.

Servant is pitted against master in Pinter’s adaptation of Robin Maugham’s novel The Servant, for a film directed by Joseph Losey (1963). In this film, the servant Barret manages to subjugate and corrupt his young master Tony until their roles are quite reversed and Barret is clearly the master both of his employer and, significantly, of his employer’s house. “It is a film about possession; not merely who owns what, but who owns who.”

As in his other works, however, Pinter’s sympathy (and Losey’s as well) is with the victimized servant Barret as much as with his victimized master. Pinter tends to see each character in the film playing a double role, master and servant, each man potentially a victim in the battle for possession, which the playwright envisions as part of the tragi-comic nature of life. Barret is portrayed, then, as understandably corrupt in a pervasively servile and corrupt world.

Losey has described Tony as “a young master who still lives in the Eighteenth century behind an Eighteenth-century facade,” who cannot cope with the incursions of the twentieth century. Certainly, the house plays a visual role in the film which the screen’s technique enhances.

The house itself plays a leading part in the story: we first see it bare and dismal, then gradually it fills to become a cocoon of expensive, insulating comfort, then the pretentious good taste of its furnishings gets out of hand and there is a return to squalor—a crowded squalor, more repulsive than its original cold emptiness.

The changes in the house mirror and effect the power struggle between the two men.

If The Servant still deals with the battle for possession of house and self, the poignancy of Pinter’s revue sketches (1959), written after his comedies of menace and just be-
fore his second major work, *The Caretaker* (1960), rests very much on their characters’ lack of place, their deterritorialized existence. In *The Black and White*, for example, two riders of all-night buses discuss their lack of any other place to go. “I wouldn’t mind staying,”18 the first old woman confides to the second, who shares soup and bread with her at a bus depot. The depot, it seems, will soon close down for its hour and a half “scrub-round,” and its lonely inhabitants will be sent on their bus-riding way. Another woman’s only place in life is at the head of a queue in the revue *Request Stop*, and the banal interchange between a barman and newspaperseller in a coffee stall in *Last To Go* suggests their lost sense of place and self.

**MAN:** I went to see if I could get hold of George.
**BARMAN:** Who?
**MAN:** George.

Pause.

**BARMAN:** George who?
**MAN:** George whatisname.

**BARMAN:** Oh.

Pause.

Did you get hold of him?

**MAN:** No. No, I couldn’t get hold of him. I couldn’t locate him.

**BARMAN:** He’s not about much now, is he?

Pause.

**MAN:** When did you last see him then?

**BARMAN:** Oh, I haven’t seen him for years.

**MAN:** No, nor me.

Pause.

**BARMAN:** Used to suffer very bad from arthritis.

**MAN:** Arthritis?

**BARMAN:** Yes.

**MAN:** He never suffered from arthritis.

Pause.

**BARMAN:** Suffered very bad.

Pause.
MAN: Not when I knew him.

Pause.

BARMAN: I think he must have left the area.

Pause.

MAN: Yes, it was the "Evening News" was the last to go tonight.

BARMAN: Not always the last though, is it, though?

"The last to go" is not only the last paper, but also George, who left the area, and the men who cling to trivialities on life's borders and in that sense have also gone. In a recording of *The Last To Go* on which Pinter himself played the Barman, the pauses were extended, emphasizing the total isolation of the character and the terrible burden of living.

The revues are excellent sketches, moreover, for the profound study of the dispossessed tramp Davies of Pinter's second major play, *The Caretaker*. Pinter returns in *The Caretaker* to his native Hackney (the area is not designated in the play, but the house in the filmed version of the play is located in Pinter's old neighborhood). His depiction of his characters "at the extreme edge of their living," as he himself describes it, is reflected in their existence in an area "on the extreme edge of London." Hackney is described by Donald Bryden as

a frontier where city and country gnaw each other ragged, the pattern of streets trailing off into weed and wasteland, the neon and billboard slogans signalling emptily over the Essex marshes. Hackney must be one of the few places in Britain where a cocktail cabinet might, just conceivably, shelter a weasel.

The ritual struggle for possession and identity in *The Caretaker* is fought out, then, on Pinter's home territory and is informed too with his sympathetic and objective observations of the dispossessed of London's all-night haunts.

In this play, a homeless old man, Mac Davies, is taken in
by Aston, a young man who takes care of his brother Mick's house. Both brothers, Aston and Mick, separately engage Davies as the house's caretaker, a position from which he is ultimately dismissed by both. The play ends with a decree of banishment for Davies, a decree engineered partly by Mick, invited partly by Davies himself, but ultimately imposed by Aston.

The central irony of the play lies in the character of Davies. Unable to accept refuge from the generous and sympathetic Aston, Davies instead plays the role of usurper, tries to dominate the situation, trusts the wrong brother, and ends up exactly where he began, out in the cold. The Caretaker is a poignant portrayal of man's self-destructive nature, his seeming compulsion to live his life in the image of the cruel ritual of the priesthood of Nemi, a battle for possession and self, a sense of self as victim or victor rather than as one self among many. Father must defeat son (The Birthday Party), or son must defeat father (The Caretaker). They cannot live in harmony as Aston desires.

The battle for possession in The Caretaker is deeply explored, and the play gains power from the masterful and complex development of the three men, all evenly balanced "so that each is as real, as grotesque, as mystic, or as vaudevillian as the other."23 And if many of Pinter's plays center on the theme of possession and dispossession of territory, The Caretaker's characters are defined almost completely in relation to the house and their attitudes toward it.

Aston is "in charge" of the house; the play takes place in his room. He is the priest guarding the sacred tree, though at the outset of the play he is off his guard. The other rooms in the house, he explains to his invited guest, are "out of commission."24 Those up the landing "need a lot of doing to," and those downstairs need "seeing to" (p. 12). The room itself is full of "stuff": boxes; various pieces of furniture—a gas stove that doesn't work, for example; a lawn-
mower, though the lawn is overgrown; a turned-over wooden chair; paint buckets; a bucket under a leak in the roof. The details of the collection reveal Aston as a dreamer, a collector of fragments that he is always attempting in vain to assemble. The furniture is there because “it might come in handy” (p. 16), and as the play opens we see Aston attempting to fix a broken plug that he is still working on when the play ends.

On one level, Aston’s accumulated “stuff” resembles the smothering furniture of Ionesco’s dramatic world. One is reminded, for example, of the hero of The New Tenant, who is buried in his own possessions. An exchange between Aston and Davies over the relative merits of different kinds of saws is as hilarious in its satire on man lost in the mechanics of the modern world as any of Ionesco’s plays and is reminiscent of Pinter’s revue sketch Trouble in the Works.

In this 1959 sketch, Mr. Wills informs his employer, Mr. Fibbs, of a workers’ rebellion in his factory. It seems that they simply don’t like the products, neither the “brass pet cock” nor the “hemi unibal spherical rod end” (p. 92). They have come to hate the straight flange pump connectors, and back nuts, and front nuts, and the bronzedraw off cock with handwheel and the bronzedraw off cock without handwheel” (p. 93). Thus in this delightful sketch Pinter mocks the importance of gadgetry to modern civilization.

The humor is similar, but the satire has tragic overtones in The Caretaker, as Aston sets out to buy his jig saw.

Aston: I think I’ll take a stroll down the road. A little kind of shop. Man there’d got a jig saw the other day. I quite liked the look of it.
Davies: A jig saw, mate?
Aston: Yes. Could be very useful.
Davies: Yes.
Slight pause.
What's that then, exactly, then?

_Aston walks up to the window and looks out._

_Aston:_ A jig saw? Well, it comes from the same family as the fret saw. But it's an appliance, you see. You have to fix it on to a portable drill.

_Davies:_ Ah, that's right. They're very handy.

_Aston:_ They are, yes.

_Pause._

_Davies:_ What about a hack-saw? (P. 25)

In the context of the play, Aston's desire for the saw that "speeds things up" (p. 26) is pathetic; it is clear that, despite his constant tinkering, he is far more the dreamer than the carpenter, a collector rather than a doer. Esslin sees him as typical modern man, seeking security and poetry in his puttering with gadgetry.

In a world that is increasingly deprived of meaning, we seek refuge in being experts in some narrow field of irrelevant knowledge or expertise. In trying to become master of some electrical appliance, Aston is seeking to get a foothold in reality.26

What distinguishes Aston from most modern putterers about the house, however, is not only his lack of success but also his broader dream. His most prized possession is a Buddha statue. "What do you think of these Buddhas?" (p. 17), he asks Davies, almost as if he would inquire what the tramp thinks of him. For Aston is a visionary whose hallucinations, we find out later in the play, have led to his downfall. Aston's dream is not even centered primarily on fixing up the house he has charge of; he dreams rather of building anew, of building a shed in the garden.

At the end of the second act, we discover that Aston's dreams have been shattered before. Hospitalized because of his hallucinations and self-revelations (he willingly shared his visions with others), Aston tells of the operation in which something was done to his brain. A victim of so-
ciety and of his own mother, whose permission was needed for the operation, Aston failed to make his escape—which, significantly, he attempted with a saw. "I spent five hours sawing at one of the bars on the window in this ward" (pp. 58-59), he explains to Davies.

Aston no longer talks to people, nor does he have his hallucinations. Instead, he collects the "bits and pieces" with which he hopes to redecorate the flat and build his shed. The jig saw which he set out to get had already been sold, and one recalls the failure of his attempt to saw his way to freedom.

But, if Aston cannot put the bits and pieces of himself or his projected shed together, neither does he allow himself to be victimized by his invited guest. He is, in fact, another of the victim-victor figures who populate the Pinter landscape. Having once been crucified by society, he is unwilling to be crucified again. His is a defensive position—unlike the priest of Nemi, he has no sword; he merely stands his ground. He will share his territory, but he will not give up his bed, or allow his window to be shut, or be bullied.

When Davies threatens Aston with another hospital experience ("They can put them pincers on your head again, man!" [p. 70]), and attacks his dream ("You build your stinking shed first!" [p. 72]), Aston gives the tramp notice that he must leave. "You stink," Aston informs Davies, not as an attack but as a fact. "For days. That's one reason I can't sleep" (p. 72). Once more, Aston has been open with somebody and has been betrayed; the play's action reflects his previous experience with society. This time, however, Aston holds his own. He still clings to his dream, undefeated. "That's not a stinking shed," he assures Davies. "It's clean. It's all good wood. I'll get it up. No trouble" (p. 72).

Aston, then, is a dreamer who invites Davies to share his domain and evicts him when he sees the tramp's incapacity to share. Aston's brother Mick, on the other hand, is a
man of action who considers Davies an intruder on what is his domain. Whereas Aston is direct and open with Davies, Mick is indirect and possessive. He seems to enjoy the invasion of his property, his room, his bed, much as Robert Ardrey suggests man and animal gain stimulation and identity from border skirmishes or territorial challenges.\(^\text{27}\) He enjoys tormenting the old man, accusing him of smelling one minute, flattering him by asking his advice another, accusing him of trespassing only to offer him the position of caretaker that his brother has already offered him.

Mick's sadistic behavior has challenged critics, who have given him the role of devil to Aston's Christ,\(^\text{28}\) or of fellow conspirator with Aston in Davies's ruin.\(^\text{29}\) Terrence Rattigan has even designated Mick as the Old Testament God, with Aston the New Testament God and Davies Humanity, an interpretation that caused Pinter to reply "that the play was about a caretaker and two brothers."\(^\text{30}\)

The realistic complexity of the play does undermine an oversimplified allegorical interpretation. Lloyd Busch has suggested the weakness in Schechner's interpretation of Aston as even a passive conspirator in Davies's defeat by pointing out that Aston is "generous and long-suffering to a fault,"\(^\text{31}\) and the complex relationship of the two brothers calls into question an interpretation that would make them either opposites (devil and god) or conspirators. In this basically territorial play, important clues to Mick's motivation and his character lie, however, in Mick's attitude toward the house.

Mick, like Aston, is a dreamer; but his dreams for the house differ from his brother's dreams. He is a man on the move, an owner of a van, a member of the building trade. While Aston dreams of his simple, clean shed, Mick dreams of a penthouse palace.

I could turn this place into a penthouse. For instance . . . this room. This room you could have as the kitchen. Right size, nice window, sun comes in. I'd have I'd have teal-
blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares. I’d have those colours re-echoed in the walls. I’d offset the kitchen units with charcoal-grey worktops. Plenty of room for cupboards for the crockery. We’d have a small wall cupboard, a large wall cupboard, a corner wall cupboard with revolving shelves. You wouldn’t be short of cupboards. You could put the dining-room across the landing, see? Yes. Venetian blinds, venetian blinds on the window, cork floor, cork tiles. You could have an off-white pile linen rug, a table in afronomosia teak veneer, sideboard with matt black drawers, curved chairs with cushioned seats, armchairs in oatmeal tweed, it wouldn’t be a flat it’d be a palace. (Pp. 63-64)

The central conflict in the play actually occurs between the brothers, between whom Davies moves as a catalyst, inadvertently collecting their dreams. Aston’s collection of odds and ends is “junk” in Mick’s eyes, for Mick’s imagination moves in the modern vein, soaring to penthouse heights, whereas Aston is a carpenter and man of the soil who would build with good clean wood. Mick complains to Davies that Aston isn’t interested in his plans. In fact, Aston doesn’t like work, Mick confides. “Causing me great anxiety. You see, I’m a working man, I’m a tradesman,” he explains. “I’ve got my own van” (p. 51).

Aston is causing his brother anxiety, but not simply because he won’t work. Aston is taking care of Mick’s house, but Mick is clearly his brother’s keeper. Who will live in the projected palace of Mick’s dream, Davies inquires. “I would, my brother and me” (p. 64), Mick replies, pointedly leaving the tramp out. The tramp, indeed, is only included by Mick, hired by him as caretaker, because he wishes to communicate with Aston and finds it hard to do so directly.

The ambivalence of Mick’s feelings for his brother is revealed in several ways. Their first direct interchange is a conversation over the leaking roof; Mick asks about it, and Aston says he will fix it. Mick is impatient but not openly critical. He does challenge Aston indirectly, however,
when he takes the bag of clothes which Aston has brought for Davies and which the three men fight over in a kind of music-hall pantomime routine. After a final series of grabs for the bag by each man, Aston gives it to Mick, who gives it to Davies. Mick will not defy his brother's trust in him. The brothers do manage an effective, if silent, communication through their gestures.

Mick further shows his mixed feelings toward his brother in the way he attacks Aston verbally to Davies and then jumps on Davies whenever he agrees or takes the criticism farther. In fact, Lloyd Busch believes that Mick's hostile treatment of the old tramp is a means of expressing hostility toward Aston, who hampers his progress and at whom he strikes more directly when he breaks Aston's beloved Buddha. He is restrained from a more direct attack on Davies, Busch believes, because of some ties of affection for his brother and concern for his illness.  

Perhaps Busch underestimates those ties of affection when he sees Mick's motives as masked hostility toward his brother. Mick's interest in Davies, whom he sees through from the first, is an extension of his interest in his brother, who infuriates him and whom he loves. Thus he traps Davies rather than throwing him out, engineering matters so that his brother will see Davies for what he is, an intruder. The climax of the play, Mick's smashing of his brother's most prized possession, his Buddha, is not an expression of Mick's hostility but an expression of his effort to free himself from his brother, to whom he has felt strongly tied. After dismissing Davies and smashing the Buddha, Mick speaks to himself broodingly:

Anyone would think this house was all I got to worry about. I got plenty of other things I can worry about. I've got other things. I've got plenty of other interests. I've got my own business to build up, haven't I? I got to think about expanding in all directions. I don't stand still. I'm moving about, all the time. I've got to think about the future. I'm
not worried about this house. I'm not interested. My brother can worry about it. He can do it up, he can decorate it, he can do what he likes with it. I'm not bothered. I thought I was doing him a favour, letting him live here. He's got his own ideas. Let him have them. I'm going to chuck it in. (P. 78)

The tone is that of over-protest—Mick is still interested, bothered. But he will “chuck” the house and let his brother have it to do with it as he likes. He will move on—follow his own path. Hence, Mick's smashing of the statue releases his feelings of impatience not only with his brother but also with himself. When the brothers meet, they exchange smiles of understanding. Aston is not overly disturbed by the broken statue. The tramp has been banished, and Mick has at last accepted Aston for what he is. He realizes Aston cannot inhabit his dream and accepts the situation he has fought so deeply.

In his own way, Mick is as dispossessed as Davies is. His ironically sadistic taunting of Davies about his identity (he badgers him about his name, his references, his bank account) reflects an unsureness about his own identity. When he finally unmasks the old man as “a bloody imposter,” a “wild animal,” the “barbarian,” identifying him as the play’s alazon-scapegoat who must be banished, one is reminded of Edward’s confrontation with the matchseller in A Slight Ache. Mick is on surer ground than Edward. He is young, alive, on the move, not ready as yet to see the “wild animal” or “barbarian” in himself—witness his barbaric treatment of the old man. But Mick’s decision to move on and leave his brother the house places him in a world as unsure as that of Davies.

Mick’s irony is directed against himself as much as it is directed against Davies. His tone suggests self-doubt even about his decorator’s vision. “You’re the only man I’ve told about my dreams,” Mick taunts Davies, “about my deepest wishes and I only told you because I understood you were an experienced first-class professional interior and
exterior decorator” (p. 76). Davies cannot fathom Mick’s language, nor deliver the goods. “You mean you wouldn’t know how to fit teal-blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares and have those colours re-echoed in the walls?” (p. 76), Mick asks him with cruelty; but the ironical tone betrays self-doubt in the dream itself. Can he possess his own dream? Is it inhabitable?

If Mick is the catalyst, then, who speeds the expulsion of Davies from his newfound haven, Davies is the catalyst who speeds Mick’s own removal from that haven. Mick’s machinations with the old man take on a “devilish” aspect only insofar as he shares with his victim that ultimate sense of dispossession with which he taunts him.

Davies, however, is far more his own victim than he is that of Mick. Literally incapable of accepting hospitality, he is prevented by his own shaken sense of identity (his papers are in Sidcup, and he is unable to get himself to pursue them) from accepting the offered haven on a sharing basis. His self-imposed role as victim is built on a deep distrust of himself and of others. Everybody is always letting him down. His own shoes will not serve him, but he cannot accept those Aston offers. He cannot drink Guinness from a thick mug, only a thin glass. He cannot be comfortable in a bed when there is a draft from an open window. A checked shirt will never serve him in the winter. “No, what I need, is a kind of a shirt with stripes, a good solid shirt, with stripes going down” (p. 43).

Unwilling to work for his keep, uncomfortable that the “blacks” on the street may invade, Davies has all the prejudices of the insecure, all the fears of eviction that lead him to attempt to play the brothers off against each other so that he may rule. The one gift he is able to accept from Aston is, amusingly enough, a smoking jacket, a gift that supplies him with the image he desires, that of the leisured proprietor of his own domain.

When Esslin suggests that Davies’s expulsion from the
house "assumes almost the cosmic proportions of Adam's expulsion from Paradise," he is not reducing the play to allegory but suggesting the universal nature of this very particular old man's predicament. "Davies' lying, his assertiveness, his inability to resist any chance to impose himself as superior, are, after all, mankind's original sin—hubris, lack of humility, blindness to our own faults."

Davies, no less than Mick, has his moment of recognition at the play's end. He has put his trust in the wrong brother, and he knows it. "What am I going to do?" (p. 81), he asks pathetically; and, despite his guilt and his unattractive behavior, his situation draws sympathy. "The final image is achieved," writes Richard Gilman, "of unbearable loneliness, of war in the members of the body, and yet also of persistent blind movement toward communion and authentic life." Far from a plotless play, The Caretaker's structure is built upon that war in the members and ends in more than despair as the trio "go on finding themselves through what they cannot find in others."

In some ways, The Caretaker is another comedy of menace as Mick terrifies the tramp with a vacuum cleaner in the dark, and Davies threatens each brother with a knife. Pinter's choice of a nonviolent ending for the play, which he originally planned to end with Davies's death, places the play, however, more in the vein of A Slight Ache, in which the source of menace is as much within as without. The Monty and Wilson of The Birthday Party and The Dumb Waiter linger on in the image of the operation Aston underwent, but Mick and Davies are victimized mainly by themselves.

In some respects, the three characters in The Caretaker are all dispossessed, all in search of their identity papers in a materialistic world that each seeks to shape to his dreams and in which each feels lost. In The Dwarfs, Len's search for his identity centered largely on his sense of place; and the search was subjective and thoroughly de-
scribed. In *The Caretaker*, Pinter achieves a masterpiece of drama by his full and objective development of three characters whose interactions with a room and with each other offer a darkly comic and poignant reading of man's fragmented life in modern society. Aston's attempt at the play's end to fix the plug that he was working on at its beginning is suggestive of a continued attempt to make a connection, despite his failure to connect with Davies. His activity assumes the nature of a ritual attempt to repair, a ritual in which Mick no longer believes, but Aston does. Mick has protected the wounded priest of Nemi from an intruding contender and has left him with his fragmented Golden Bough.

The ritual battle for possession of place in *The Caretaker* is beautifully captured in the 1963 film version of the play as directed by Clive Donner. This low budget (£30,000), prize-winning film (the film was awarded a Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival for its production, direction, script, and acting) was a unique venture in filmmaking. Conventional sources of film finance were withdrawn; and Pinter, the producer, Michael Burkett, and the actors, Donald Pleasence, Alan Bates, and Robert Shaw formed a special company in order to make the film. This arrangement allowed them to work closely and freely in what was totally their own venture. Donner describes with enthusiasm an initial eleven-hour meeting of the company on the transfer of the play to the screen, the three-week rehearsal period before shooting—a somewhat unusual feature of his film direction—and a last-day five-hour rehearsal of the whole piece with Pinter present. Filmed on location at a house in Hackney not far from Pinter's birthplace, with Donald Pleasence and Alan Bates re-creating their stage roles of the tramp Davies and the brother Mick, the film was the culmination and fruition of a long stage-run as well as an intensive film rehearsal period.

The transfer of the play to the screen enabled Pinter to
make an important point about the entire body of his work: he invisions his characters realistically living in actual places, not operating symbolically in a void. Pinter's feeling that the core of our lives is ambiguous and non-verifiable has often become confused with an attempt to mystify his audience about the background of his characters. In the film version of *The Caretaker*, Mick appears in his van; there is a garden outside, a café at the corner. Pinter found particular satisfaction in clearing up this "real" background for his characters in *The Caretaker*, and his films, by the very nature of the medium, tend to accentuate the naturalistic surface which he so lovingly creates in his dramatic world.

If the filming of *The Caretaker* on location emphasized the "reality" of the claustrophobic attic room, the additional outside scenes underlined the need of the tramp for the room and helped to clarify the relationship of the brothers to the house and to each other. The cold, snowy scenes outside dramatized the tramp's need for a home, making his inevitable expulsion more pathetic; and Donner requested an addition from Pinter, a remark on the snow by Davies. "What about all this bastard snow now? I mean when is it going to go?" Davies complains, a marvelously characteristic remark for the tramp, the eternal victim in his own eyes, even of the weather. A scene in which Mick offers Davies a ride to Sidcup in his van not only emphasizes the reality of Mick's life outside, as well as inside, the room, but emphasizes as well the suffering of Davies, who might have to make good his boasting of locating his papers and identity in Sidcup. It emphasizes too the macabre humor of the taunting Mick, who deposits the tramp back where he picked him up after a short ride around the block and some feeble excuses. Pinter also added a silent scene of communication between the brothers. "The brothers," Donner explained in an interview, "do not speak, Mick staring into the pond, Aston at some wood
and then the pond. Davies is at the window wondering what they are looking at.” Here Donner touched his nose in the manner of Davies. “Nosey,” he explained.

The film then, faithful to the play, actually clarified some of the nature of the character relationships and conflict through careful use of image in moments of silence, through careful use of sound (the film opened with a dripping sound, ominous in the surrounding silence), through the additional “van” scene with its emphasis on the rather brutal humor of the piece, and through the concentration on the weather, which added a dimension both to the play’s realism and to its ritual base. Pinter, in fact, admired Donner’s work on the film, not only because it cleared up unwanted ambiguities in the drama’s realism, but because inside and outside Donner concentrated on the characters “almost as if only these characters exist.” Hence this masterful film succeeded not only in capturing the very realistic texture of Pinter’s dramatic world but also the intensity of his characters who operate as if they alone make up the world. The characters in the film are at once unique, real individuals living in a real world and archetypal figures who engage in a ritual battle for possession which is at the center of Pinter’s vision of the world.