# The Caretaker

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HAROLD PINTER

Harold Pinter was born on October 10, 1930, in a working-class neighborhood in east London to British Jewish parents Hyman "Jack" and Frances Pinter. In 1940 and 1941, after the Blitz, Pinter was evacuated from his family home in London and sent away to Cornwall and Reading for his safety. This experience had a profound impact on Pinter, instilling within him lasting feelings of loneliness and alienation that would color many of his later works, including *The Caretaker*. As a young boy, Pinter was educated at the Hackney Downs School, where he began writing poetry. After leaving school, Pinter worked as an actor, touring with the Anew McMaster repertory company in the early 1950s, as well as the Donald Wolfit Company. He wrote his first play, *The Room*, in 1957, following this with *The Birthday Party*, his first full-length play, that same year. Written in 1959 and first produced in 1960, *The Caretaker* is Pinter's second full-length play, and it was the first of his plays to be commercially successful. He continued to write plays into the 1970s and later decades, but his earlier plays are the works for which he is best known. Pinter was the recipient of many awards over the course of his career, most notably the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005. His works are best known for their opaque, repetitive dialogue, which is often punctuated by silence. He died of liver cancer on December 24, 2008.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Social status and class relations in 1950s London play a significant role in the particular lens through which *The Caretaker* explores its Absurdist themes. World War II devastated the United Kingdom. Large areas of urban centers were destroyed in the Blitz, a German bombing campaign that lasted from September 1940 to May 1941. The Allies might have emerged victoriously, but over the course of World War II, the United Kingdom incurred many losses, including nearly 400,000 soldiers dying in combat and 70,000 civilian casualties. With massive rebuilding projects to be completed in the aftermath of this catastrophic period in history, the United Kingdom found itself in the midst of a labor shortage. The passage of the 1948 British Nationality Act allowed Commonwealth citizens to acquire the British passports needed to work in the U.K., which resulted in a wave of mass immigration that continued into the 1950s. Immigrants also arrived from other countries throughout Europe, with the Irish being the largest immigrant group. Mass immigration caused a marked shift in Britain's demographics, and tensions quickly developed. Many immigrants lived in lower-income areas of urban centers like London and were often met with discrimination.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*The Caretaker* contains elements from a movement in drama called the Theater of the Absurd, which was used to describe the plays of certain dramatists in the 1950s and 1960s. The term was coined by the British critic Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962). Esslin developed his philosophy from ideas in Albert Camus's essay *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), in which Camus describes the human condition as absurd and devoid of meaning. Esslin's essay focuses on the plays of Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugene Ionesco, though many other plays (such as *The Caretaker*) are thought to subscribe to the ideas Esslin puts forth in his essay. At their core, Absurdist plays are dictated by the notion that life is meaningless, and those who try to prove or act otherwise do so in vain. Absurdist plays, therefore, are characterized by plots lacking in conventional dramatic development, and by characters who are ultimately unable to control their destinies. The language of an Absurdist play often reflects its thematic meaninglessness, with characters speaking illogically, circuitously, and shallowly. Although the illogical nature of these plays can imbue them with a comedic exterior, their resounding judgment of life as meaningless renders them tragic as well. Many of Pinter's plays besides *The Caretaker* contain Absurdist elements. Some examples of these plays are *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*. Examples of notable Absurdist dramas by other authors include *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, *The Rhinoceros* by Eugène Ionesco, *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee, and *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Caretaker
- **When Written:** 1959
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1960
- **Literary Period:** Absurdist Theater
- **Genre:** Drama, Tragicomedy
- **Setting:** A house in west London
- **Climax:** Aston tells Davies about his forced institutionalization.
- **Antagonist:** Davies
- **Point of View:** Dramatic

## EXTRA CREDIT

**From Stage to Screen.** A film version of *The Caretaker*, directed by Clive Donner, was released in 1963. The film was based on Pinter's unpublished screenplay.

**Alternate Ending.** Pinter originally planned to have *The Caretaker* end with Mick and Aston murdering Davies, though he ultimately decided to spare Davies this gruesome fate.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Mick sits alone in a room filled with all kinds of clutter, including various kitchen appliances, two beds, and a **Buddha statue**, among other things. A **bucket** hangs from the ceiling to catch the water leaking out of a crack. Mick hears voices approaching from outside and quickly leaves the room. After Mick leaves, Mick's brother Aston enters the room, accompanied by Davies, an old, disheveled drifter. Davies inspects the room and complains about the foreigners at the café where he worked until this evening, when he was fired for fighting with a coworker. It was Aston who interfered in the brawl and who later decided to bring Davies home with him. As Davies complains, Aston tinkers with some tools.

Aston offers to let Davies spend the night in his home. Davies accepts the offer, though he immediately complains about the room's cluttered state, the draught, and "them Blacks" who also live in the building. He also asks Aston for a pair of **shoes**, which he claims to need to return to Sidcup to retrieve his identifying papers and other important documents. Aston explains that he's been going by a false name, Bernard Jenkins, and that he needs to retrieve his papers so that people don't uncover his lies. Aston brings Davies a pair of shoes, though Davies immediately complains about them being too small. When Aston asks about Davies's future plans, Davies gives no definite answer. Davies then asks about the Buddha statue. Aston says something vague about liking how the statue looks.

The next morning, Aston tells Davies he was making noise in his sleep. Davies denies this and accuses "them Blacks" of causing the commotion. Aston leaves to meet a man about buying a tool.

After Aston leaves, Davies roots around in Aston's stuff looking for things to steal. Distracted, Davies doesn't notice when Mick silently enters the room. Mick assumes Davies is an intruder and attacks him. Davies eventually fends off Mick, and the men talk a bit, though Davies refuses to tell Mick much about his background, introducing himself by his false name, Barry Jenkins. The conversation ultimately goes nowhere, and Mick again accuses Davies of being a thief.

Aston returns and tries to diffuse the tension. Mick leaves, and Aston explains that he's supposed to be fixing up the place for Mick. He also talks about wanting to build a shed out back.

Once Aston is finished daydreaming, he asks Davies if he'd like to be the caretaker. Davies is hesitant, apparently not too keen on the idea of a job that would require him to do too much work.

Sometime later, Davies enters the dark and seemingly unoccupied room, only to find that the light switch won't work. Mick, who has unscrewed the lightbulb and who is hiding in the darkness, frightens Davies with a vacuum cleaner. Davies demands to know why Mick won't stop messing with him. Mick offers half his sandwich as a peace offering, which Davies reluctantly accepts. They talk about Aston, and Davies admits that he can't quite figure him out. Mick sympathizes with Davies, explaining that he has grown frustrated with Aston's apparent unwillingness to work, though he suddenly changes his tune and angrily accuses Davies of being overly critical of Aston. Mick then changes course once more, flattering Davies and inviting him to be the caretaker, an offer that Davies accepts. Mick asks for Davies's references. Davies says his documents and references are in Sidcup and that he'll retrieve them as soon as the weather improves and he can get some proper shoes.

The next morning, Aston again complains about Davies making noise in his sleep. In response, Davies complains about the open window making the room draughty at night. The men argue back and forth. Aston announces that he's going to go out today to ask about buying a bench. Davies announces that he'll go to Sidcup today, though he ultimately changes his mind.

Aston gives a long speech about being involuntarily committed to an asylum and given electroshock treatment for hallucinations when he was a young man, and how this treatment makes it hard for him to think and to communicate with others.

Two weeks later, Mick and Davies are in the room alone. Davies tells Mick that he and Aston have hardly spoken since Aston told him about being committed. He complains about how hard it is to talk to Aston, speculating that he and Mick get along better and could actually get stuff done. Mick agrees and entertains the idea of fixing up the place with Davies, though he remains adamant that it will be he and Aston who will live in the finished home—not Davies. Davies starts ragging on Aston. Mick doesn't say much and gets up to leave.

Aston enters the room and hands Davies some shoes. Davies complains about the shoes while making tentative plans to return to Sidcup. Aston exits the room without Davies noticing, which greatly annoys Davies.

Later that night, Davies starts making noises in his sleep. Aston orders him to be quiet. In retaliation, Davies ridicules Aston for his mental illness and prior institutionalization, threatening that Mick can have him recommitted. Aston tells Davies to leave. Davies puts his knife to Aston's throat, but Aston calmly repeats his order, backs away from Davies, and silently places

Davies's things near the door. Davies leaves the room while Aston fiddles with a plug.

Later on, Davies complains to Mick about Aston's behavior, but Mick stands up for his brother. Davies refuses to back down, suggesting that Mick should send Aston back to the asylum. Mick is still mad but changes the subject, mentioning something about Davies being an accomplished interior decorator, though Davies insists he never purported to be one. Mick demands to know Davies's real name. Still caught off guard by Mick's assumption, Davies suggests that it was the "nutty" Aston who told him about Davies being an interior decorator, which makes Mick even more upset. Mick tells Davies to leave. He then throws the Buddha statue to the ground, shattering it.

Aston enters, and he and Mick exchange a silent smile as Mick leaves the room. Aston notes the smashed Buddha statue. Davies makes a grand speech about how kind Aston has been to him, offering to help Aston complete the woodshed. But Davies's pleas do little to convince Aston, who turns his back to the old man as Davies slowly makes his way toward the door.

## CHARACTERS

**Davies** – Davies is an old drifter. He becomes acquainted with the play's other main characters, brothers Mick and Aston, after Aston intervenes in a brawl at a café in which Davies was involved, and Aston invites Davies to stay in his home. Despite being homeless and without a penny to his name, Davies is loud, arrogant, and overconfident. He believes everyone is out to get him and blames others, most often "Blacks" and foreigners, for his misfortunes. In reality, however, it's Davies's combative nature and unwillingness to work that are to blame for many of his problems. Davies is extremely ungrateful to the overly generous Aston, repeatedly finding reasons to complain about the room and its inhabitants. In the beginning of the play, for example, Davies asks Aston for **shoes**, explaining that he needs useable footwear to travel to Sidcup to retrieve his identifying papers and other important documents. When Aston presents Davies with perfectly useable shoes, Davies immediately rejects them on the basis that they are too small and uncomfortable. Despite Davies's insistence that he'll go to Sidcup to get his papers, he repeatedly finds reasons to delay the journey, such as his lack of shoes or the undesirable weather. As the play progresses, it becomes abundantly clear that Davies has no real intention to go to Sidcup, preferring to loaf around the room and to take advantage of Aston's hospitality for as long as possible. Like Mick and Aston, Davies seems unable to engage in meaningful conversation, often speaking in nonsensical, circuitous fashion, or else brandishing his knife and threatening violence in lieu of meaningful communication. Davies is also mean-spirited, deceptive, and manipulative: he admits to using a false name, refuses to come clean about his history, and manipulates Mick and Aston to independently offer him the position of caretaker for the building. He also attempts to pit the brothers against each other. One prime example of Davies's deceptive, manipulative nature is his callous response to Aston's emotional confession about his forced institutionalization and electroshock treatment. Rather than responding to Aston with sympathy and compassion, Davies uses Aston's confession against him, trying to convince Mick that Aston needs to be readmitted to the hospital and making fun of Aston's mental illness to his face. Davies's deception, laziness, and cruelty toward Aston ultimately turns both brothers against him and results in his expulsion from the room.

**Aston** – Aston is Mick's older brother. He is in his early thirties, quiet, mild-mannered, and rather slow and reserved in his speech. Aston spends much of the play fiddling with various tools and appliances, most notably a box of plugs, a screwdriver, and a wooden plank. Aston is supposed to be fixing up the place for Mick, though he doesn't seem capable of completing any tasks he sets out to do. Aston has dreams of building a woodshed in the backyard; as the play unfolds, however, it becomes clear that Aston likely will never accomplish this task. Aston fills the room with various objects, including **the Buddha statue**, as he has a hard time organizing his thoughts and interacting with other people. Aston used to suffer from hallucinations, which resulted in him being forcibly institutionalized and subjected to electroshock treatment when he was a young man. Aston attributes his mental fogginess and inability to connect with others to this treatment and wants to find the doctor who performed it. Aston and Mick don't have much of a relationship for the majority of the play: they don't talk to each other, and their only explicit interaction occurs in the play's final scene, when they exchange a silent smile right before Aston kicks Davies out of the room. This exchange—however small and fleeting it may be—suggests that the brothers are finally growing closer and that they've maintained some semblance of loyalty to each other despite the outward appearance of distance and estrangement. Aston is extremely generous to Davies for the majority of the play, giving him shelter, **shoes**, a bed to sleep in, and offering him the position of caretaker for the building. Davies responds ungratefully to Aston's generosity, however, complaining about the draughty, cluttered state of Aston's room and the insufficiency of the shoes. When Aston shares the tragic story of his institutionalization, Davies responds cruelly, attempting to manipulate Mick into recommitting Aston and ridiculing Aston's mental health issues to his face. Ultimately, Aston grows tired of Davies's noisiness, rudeness, and cruelty, and he orders Davies to leave.

**Mick** – Mick is Aston's younger brother. He is in his late twenties. Though he owns the building in which Aston resides, he lives elsewhere. Unlike Aston, who is initially trusting of

Davies, Mick is skeptical of the tramp from the very beginning, believing that Davies has ulterior motives. Mick repeatedly messes with Davies, such as when he frightens him with the vacuum cleaner in Act II. He's also highly manipulative with the older man, swiftly shifting between sympathizing with and attacking him. For example, Mick will complain to Davies about their mutual frustration with Aston's demeanor and work ethic only to suddenly—and often arbitrarily—defend his brother, berating Davies for going too far in his criticisms. Despite this, Mick also claims that he and Davies understand each other, though it's not completely clear whether this is just another method of manipulation on Mick's part. Mick and Aston don't have much of a relationship for the majority of the play, with their only key interaction occurring in the final scene, when they exchange a silent smile before Aston kicks Davies out of the building. It seems as though Mick and Aston have grown distant in the years before the actions of the play take place. Despite this, Mick is committed to caring for his brother: the fact that he continuously drops in at the building over the course of the play suggests that he functions as something of a caregiver for Aston who, after his treatment at the institution, is unable to care for himself. Mick also gives Aston the job of fixing up the building, though as the play unfolds, it seems increasingly clear that Aston isn't up to completing this task. Like Davies, Mick is often aggressive and violent, which is apparent in the scene in which he taunts Davies with the Electrolux, when he withholds Davies's bag and trousers, and when Mick, initially believing Davies to be an intruder, wrestles him to the floor in their first interaction with each other. Like the play's other main characters, Mick seems incapable of communicating meaningfully, often speaking in a circuitous, absurd fashion. Mick has lofty ambitions that, for the most part, go unrealized. For instance, Aston tells Davies that Mick is "in the building trade," and Mick tells Davies that he's a businessman, yet it's never made clear exactly what Mick does or how successful his business is. Mick dreams of one day finishing the building and living there with Aston, but his immediate frustrations with Aston's dependence and inability to finish the repairs distract him from realizing this dream. Though Mick appears to care about Aston, he also grows impatient with Aston's many needs. When Mick offers Davies the position of caretaker, it's possible that Mick is trying to relieve himself of the burdens of caring for both the building and Aston.

**Mother** – Mother is Mick and Aston's mother. She doesn't appear in the present day, only mentioned a few times in passing by Mick and Aston. When Aston was institutionalized as a minor, she gave the doctors permission to perform electroshock therapy on Aston. This betrayal could be an impetus for the emotionally distanced relationship toward family Aston has for much of the play.

## THEMES

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### POWER AND DECEPTION

*The Caretaker*'s main characters—Davies, Aston, and Mick—are all powerless in the face of the chaotic, oppressive forces that rule their world. Aston is forcibly institutionalized because of his mental illness, Davies's homelessness makes him desperate and reliant on others, and Mick's many familial and financial obligations overwhelm him. In response to their lack of power, every character—even the comparatively altruistic, harmless Aston—engages in manipulation and deception in an attempt to gain power and control over their surroundings (and, by extension, over one another). Davies lies about his past to ingratiate himself with Mick and Aston, Mick absorbs himself in his work and obligations to ignore the bleak reality of his life, and Aston talks incessantly of his plans to build a shed in an effort to convince himself and others that he is a motivated, functioning member of society. But none of these tactics genuinely fulfill the characters or change what they're worried about. So, although the story positions deception a way to *feel* in control, it also suggests that lying to oneself and others doesn't bring a person lasting power or solve their problems.

Davies recognizes that he's powerless and unqualified in the eyes of society, so he lies to Mick and Aston to ingratiate himself with the brothers and prolong his stay in their home. In the society of the play (post-WWII London), productivity and social status are what give people value—so Davies's poverty, derelict appearance, and lack of work ethic put him at a severe disadvantage. As a result, he resorts to lying: when Mick follows his offer to Davies to be the building's caretaker by asking Davies if he was "in the services," for example, Davies's responds, "the what?" This rather humorously confirms what the audience surely must have guessed: that, of course, the lethargic and aimless Davies hasn't served in the military. Davies follows this slip up, however, by responding affirmatively and with gusto to Mick's suggestion, stating "oh…yes. Spent half my life there, man. Overseas…like…serving…I was." In deceiving Mick into believing he served in the military, Davies projects the experience and credibility he needs to convince Mick that he's qualified to be the caretaker of Mick and Aston's house—qualities that he knows he can't acquire through honest means. In this way, lying to Mick secures Davies the power that comes with having credibility, a job, and a roof over one's head.

But Davies lies to himself as much as he lies to other people, and he merely reinforces his own powerlessness when he blames others in a futile attempt to gain power. Davies crafts a narrative about who is responsible for his setbacks, positing that others—namely Black people and foreigners—are to blame for the ills that plague him. For example, he grumbles to Aston about not being able to find an empty seat during his tea break at the café that night, explaining that "all them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens" were "doing [him] out of a seat, treating [him] like dirt." He goes a step further, claiming that these foreigners "got the manners of pigs." Davies's statements are ironic, as it's really he who has bad manners, which he demonstrates in his unwillingness to take orders during work and his tendency to lash out violently when he believes someone has wronged him. In this sense, Davies blames other people (often scapegoating certain races or ethnicities) for his own misdeeds or for circumstances that are beyond his control, which allows him to maintain an imagined status of importance and agency. But importantly, blaming others does not actually solve Davies's problems: complaining about Black people and immigrants doesn't free up a seat for him, just as lying about his military service doesn't actually make him a qualified, disciplined person. So, although lying to himself might give Davies a sense of control over his life, it doesn't empower or help him in any lasting, meaningful way.

While Davies is the most explicitly deceptive character in the play, Mick and Aston also lie to themselves and to others to feel some level of control over their chaotic, dissatisfying lives. Aston repeatedly tries to convince himself and others that he really can build the woodshed out back, going out on multiple occasions to pick up the tools and supplies he needs to start the task. Mick, meanwhile, lies to himself that he and Aston will one day live harmoniously in a fully repaired, lavishly decorated home in order to distract himself from worrying about Aston (who is disabled) and dealing with Aston's failure to make the repairs. Like Davies, Mick and Aston tell themselves the lies they want to believe in order to bring order and purpose to their otherwise flailing, unfulfilled lives. But in the end, these lies don't bring them any closer to achieving their goals, and in fact seem to leave the men paralyzed and unmotivated to actively improve their lives.

## THE ABSURDITY OF MODERN SOCIETY

*The Caretaker* contains elements common to a movement in drama called the Theater of the Absurd, a term coined by British critic Martin Esslin to describe the plays of Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugene Ionesco. Absurdist plays encapsulate the irrationality, contradiction, and meaninglessness that their writers see as symptomatic of the modern world. The particular absurdity in *The Caretaker* directly relates to issues of class and social conformity, with each character desperately trying to realize their worth in terms of their economic usefulness and social status. Aston spends the whole play trying to fix things or talking about future up-keeping projects, seemingly wanting to validate his ability to work and be useful. Mick, meanwhile, holds on to his lofty ambitions of becoming wealthy and living in a lavish home, and Davies works hard to hide his poverty so that Mick and Aston will accept him. The desperation with which each character tries—and fails—to uphold the outward appearance of economic and social prosperity borders on ridiculous. In this way, the play's absurdity suggests that the way modern society judges people's value makes it difficult (if not impossible) for people to achieve genuine happiness and success.

Aston's efforts to be useful and productive are tragically absurd in their impossibility: he repeatedly tries to convince himself and others that he's capable of repairing and decorating Mick's building, even though he clearly isn't. Aston, who desperately wants to be a contributing member of society, perpetually prepares to fix various objects around the house, a job Mick assigned him sometime before the events of the play. He makes a big show of getting ready to undertake this massive job, leaving multiple times to get the tools and materials he needs and talking about his goals incessantly. These outward displays indicate Aston's desire for Mick and Davies (and by extension, the world at large) to see him as useful. They illuminate his underlying social and economic insecurity, as his earlier electroshock treatment for mental illness has rendered him permanently disabled and unable to engage meaningfully with the world around him. The absurdity of Aston's anxiety lies in the fact that he's in an impossible situation: his disability renders him physically unable to be productive, and yet the only way he can conceive of being valued is through his ability to work.

Alongside this, Mick's situation is absurd in its irony: his attempts to help Aston by giving him the job of fixing up the building only fuel Aston's feelings of helplessness. Like Aston, Mick appears to believe that his worth as a person depends on an outward appearance of social credibility and financial prosperity. As a result, it is his dream to live with Aston in the fully repaired and elaborately decorated building that Mick owns. He ostensibly enlists Aston to fix up and decorate the building in an attempt to make this dream a reality—but it's obvious that Aston is incapable of doing this, so it's also possible that Mick is simply trying to give his isolated, disabled brother a sense of purpose. But Mick's attempts to instill purpose and meaning in his and Aston's lives are in vain: Aston's physical and mental limitations hinder his ability to complete the repairs, which only makes Aston's helplessness and inability to be productive all the more obvious. And, as a result, Aston's failure only seems to push Mick's idealized vision further out of reach. This situation, darkly absurd in its inescapability, gives

the sense that in a society that values people only for their material success, people's efforts to lift themselves out of poverty and disillusionment may only push them down further.

Finally, Davies's situation is absurd in its contradictory nature, as his vain attempts to conceal his poverty lead him to reject the charity that could actually help him transcend it. When Davies asks Aston for a pair of **shoes**—which he insists he needs in order to go to Sidcup to retrieve the identification papers he needs to get a job—Aston generously obliges, offering Davies a perfectly acceptable pair of shoes. Davies, however, immediately takes issue with the shoes, complaining about their fit and appearance and melodramatically lamenting that wearing them would "cripple [him] in a week." Davies wants other people to think he has high standards and refined tastes, but this leads him to reject Aston's act of generosity. As a result, he denies himself access to the help he needs and thus the ability to improve his situation and actually become impressive to others. Davies rejects shoes from Aston not once but twice, which lends an element of comedy to his self-defeating behavior, rendering it even more absurd. In different ways, then, Mick, Aston, and Davies all absurdly perpetuate the very social and economic circumstances they wish to transcend, suggesting that the way modern society measures people's worth by their productivity and outward displays of wealth sets disadvantaged people up to fail.

## ALIENATION AND FAMILY

One of the most notable features of *The Caretaker* is the alienation of its central characters—brothers Aston and Mick, and the elderly, conniving drifter, Davies, whom Aston invites to stay with them after Davies is involved in a brawl in the café where Davies works. All of the play's action occurs in the severely restrictive confines of a single room, which results in the men having virtually no exposure to the people or social structures that exist beyond these four walls. Their alienation extends beyond the physical, as well: all three characters have painful, distant, or nonexistent relationships with their families. This includes Aston and Mick's relationship, which is strained and uncommunicative. Yet in the end, it is Aston and Mick's unspoken obligation to each other as siblings that allows them to transcend their crippling state of alienation and remove the manipulative, scheming Davies from their home. Their relationship is the closest any of the characters in *The Caretaker* come to finding meaning and connection. The play thus offers a complicated view of family: it can be a source of alienation and pain in itself, but it can also be a source of comfort and purpose in an otherwise alienating modern world.

The characters' familial relationships are largely empty and meaningless—if not nonexistent. At one point, Mick calls his father his "uncle's brother" and hints that his uncle might actually *be* his father. That he refers to his father in such an indirect, impersonal way and questions the identity of his father altogether suggests that family isn't always a source of comfort and stability; it can also be a source of confusion and absurdity, to the point that one might not even be sure who their family *is*. Davies's relationship with his ex-wife was similarly meaningless: he humorously describes leaving her "no more than a week" after they married because she left a pot of unwashed underwear on the stove. Furthermore, in the present, there's no indication that Davies, Mick, or Aston have any extended family or even close friends. These shallow, trivial, or nonexistent relationships create the sense that family bonds aren't inherently close or special. In the society of the play, relationships traditionally viewed as sacred (like those between parent and child or husband and wife) have become nothing more than superficial labels—and in some cases, even those labels are meaningless.

The play also shows how family relationships can be deeply painful and alienating. Before the events of the play, Aston had hallucinations (it's implied that he was suffering from some sort of mental illness). The acquaintances he confided in about this misunderstood him and got him forcibly committed to a mental hospital, but the way his own mother treated him was even more devastating, as she was the one who signed off on giving Aston electroconvulsive shock therapy. This was something he never expected her to agree to—suggesting that he didn't know his mother as well as he thought he did—and his botched treatment left him permanently brain damaged, mentally disabled, and traumatized. Aston's condition is, in a way, a representation of how being misunderstood and betrayed by a family member can be uniquely painful and scarring, and how family can compound rather than relieve the alienation one experiences in society.

Yet despite these dysfunctional relationships, Mick and Aston are loyal to each other, and their relationship is the closest the play comes to offering up a possible source of meaning or purpose. Although the brothers never speak to each other in the play, there are several hints that they have an unspoken bond and care deeply for each other. For one, Mick dreams of one day living with Aston in the building that Mick owns, and he gives Aston the task of renovating it, despite the fact that Mick is a professional builder and Aston isn't physically or mentally capable of completing this project. He does so because he's worried about Aston's stagnancy in life—he wants to get his little brother "going in the world," even if that means giving him a job that Mick could do better himself. Moreover, at several points in the play, Davies tries to manipulate the brothers by turning them against each other. But Aston is hesitant to go along with Davies's criticism of Mick, and Mick likewise gets angry when Davies is "hypercritical" of Aston. The brothers' similar reactions hint at an unspoken bond that transcends the emotional distance between them—one that gives Aston a source of advocacy and support and Mick a source of purpose

(he is, in a sense, the play's titular "caretaker" of Aston). Even though Aston and Mick are not a close family unit on the surface, then, they form a united front against the interloper who wants to undermine their relationship.

In fact, Mick and Aston's relationship is what eventually gives Aston the strength to remove the manipulative Davies from their lives. In the play's final scene, Aston enters the room after Mick smashes Aston's beloved **Buddha statue** on the floor out of frustration with Davies. He faces Mick, and the two brothers share a silent smile. It's immediately after this interaction that Aston decisively rejects Davies, ignoring the old man's threats of violence and attempts at manipulation and literally turning his back on him, forcing the rejected Davies to leave the room once and for all. The solidarity Mick and Aston communicate through their intimate, knowing smile seems to be rooted in an ingrained sense of understanding and loyalty that they feel toward each other as brothers, and this empowers Aston to make good on his intentions—something no character has been able to do up until this moment. When Aston turns his back on Davies, he metaphorically chooses solidarity with Mick over the destructive alienation represented in Davies's character. With this shift, the play presents a complex and even contradictory view of family: familial relationships can reflect and perpetuate the alienation of the modern world, but they can also give otherwise isolated and vulnerable people a sense of support, strength, and meaningful connection.

## IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICITY

While *The Caretaker* centers entirely on the characters of Mick, Aston, and Davies, it's difficult to get a sense of their true personalities. In fact, it's often the case that the characters know more about what one another *do* (or hope to do) than who they truly *are*: Mick owns a building and maintains some kind of business, Aston has aspirations to build a shed that never come to fruition, and Davies is a drifter who lies and manipulates others for personal gain. While the characters' external activities are apparent, making their identities clear on a superficial level, the characters never come to know themselves or one another in a deeper sense. *The Caretaker* positions identity as fluid, impermanent, and determined by outside forces and other people's observations, rather than something that is inherent to a person or derived from within. Even exceptions that might otherwise provide insight into a character's identity—such as Aston's tragic backstory of forced institutionalization and electroconvulsive shock therapy—only further illustrate the fragility of identity. The play thus suggests that identity is highly unstable, and that outside influences like trauma or social pressure can empty a person of any authentic, permanent sense of self.

Davies, who readily admits to using a false name and identification papers, constructs his identity around what others expect him to be, or around what will benefit him on a superficial level. When Mick first floats the idea of hiring Davies to be the building's (and, implicitly, Aston's) caretaker, he describes Davies as "a capable sort of man." Despite the fact that Davies is anything but capable—he gets in fights, can't hold down a job, and doesn't have a wearable pair of **shoes** to his name—Davies agrees with Mick's assessment, stating, "I am a capable sort of man." In the same conversation, Davies responds affirmatively to Mick's (incorrect) assumption that Davies was in the military in order to appear qualified enough to assume the role of caretaker. In another instance, Davies conceals his birthplace from Aston when Aston inquires if Davies is Welsh. Davies stutters, insisting that "it's a bit hard, like, to set [his] mind back" far enough to remember where he's from. Davies is afraid of revealing himself as even more of an outsider than he already is as a guest in Aston's house, so he pretends not to know his origins to avoid the possibility of identity-based discrimination. Davies's calculating eagerness to please leads him to create a fabricated identity in order to reap the benefits of Mick's and Aston's acceptance. In this way, it is other people's perceptions, rather than an innate sense of self, that determine his identity.

Like Davies, Aston's identity is also determined by external forces: Aston's traumatic institutionalization, electroshock therapy, and resultant brain damage render him stuck in the past and unable to live authentically and fulfill his desires. When Aston was a young man, he suffered from hallucinations. When he told people about them, he was forcibly institutionalized and given electroshock treatment, which resulted in permanent brain damage. Aston reveals that after the treatment, his "thoughts…had become very slow." Besides finding it physically difficult to talk to people because of the mental limitations his treatment imposed on him, Aston learns not to trust others, for fear of future betrayal. Society's misunderstanding of mental illness forced a traumatic experience onto Aston, the effects of which now drastically limit his ability to exist freely in the world and express himself. This, in turn, prevents him from growing into the person he might have become if things had played out differently. Aston's inability to complete the building repairs for Mick could even be read as a physical embodiment of his internal mental stifling: it's almost as though he is so afraid of expressing himself that he can't even bring himself to do so indirectly, through his repairs and decorating projects. Completing tasks such as decorating the building or building the woodshed out back would put Aston's authentic self on display for the whole world, which is something his past renders him too traumatized to do.

Moreover, all three characters project their ambitions and anxieties onto external objects, which prevents them from reflecting on their own desires and anxieties. As a result, they deny themselves the opportunity to live authentically by taking responsibility for their shortcomings and miscalculations and

asserting their own identities. For instance, Davies blames his inability to go to Sidcup or look for any kind of job on not having shoes rather than on his own lethargy and lack of motivation. Aston hoards objects that are "well made" or "nice" looking to compensate for his inability to finish (or even start) the many home improvement projects he promised Mick he would do. And finally, Mick, Aston, and Davies all fixate on the **bucket** hanging from the ceiling at some point in the play, which Aston placed there in lieu of actually fixing the leaks in the roof. In all of these instances, characters project their internalized shortcomings onto objects, effectively preventing themselves from really knowing themselves and one another. The play thus suggests that rather than being clear and consistent, identity is often highly malleable and difficult to pin down—and that a person's traumas or unwillingness to face themselves can lead them to assume an inauthentic identity.

## THE LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE

Throughout *The Caretaker*, Mick, Davies, and Aston do a lot of talking, yet they never manage to convey any meaningful information that might deepen their understanding of themselves and one another. Effectively communicating through language isn't something that Mick, Davies, or Aston seem willing to do or capable of doing. Time and again, the men fail to listen to one another, often changing the subject in lieu of answering questions or uttering nonsense in place of discernible, objective facts. In the wake of the failure of language, the characters often flail about physically: Davies is quick to pull out his knife or use other objects in the room as weapons, for example, and Aston resorts to messing with a plug and screwdriver when conflict threatens to become unmanageable, or when his own words are misunderstood or overlooked. By demonstrating the limits of language and the physical (and sometimes violent) interactions that flourish in its absence, *The Caretaker* suggests that language isn't always sufficient when it comes to expressing complex thoughts or difficult emotions, and that people's actions tend to be more truthful than their words.

Characters in *The Caretaker* seem unable or unwilling to communicate with one another, and their physical actions underscore the absence of meaningful language. In the beginning of the play, right after Aston and Davies return home from the café, Davies brags about how he dealt with the man he got into a fight with and prompts Aston to compliment his toughness. But Aston doesn't respond to Davies's question directly, offering a meager "I saw him have a go at you" in response before he begins to tinker with a wooden plank and screwdriver. Aston seems hesitant to go along with Davies's bravado or contradict it, so instead of using words, he turns to his tools to occupy himself and avoid engaging with Davies meaningfully. This begins to suggest that language—especially for someone like Aston, whose mental disability makes verbal communication difficult—can't always adequately express people's true feelings. Later on, in one of the play's more comical moments, Mick antagonizes Davies by playing keep away with Davies's bag (Mick takes the bag and throws it to Aston, Aston gives it back to Davies, Mick takes it again, and so on). The exchange is funny, but it's also significant, as it's one of the few moments when the characters engage simultaneously and directly with one another. Mick, Davies, and Aston are all frustrated with one another, but they're only able to express this frustration nonverbally, again suggesting that what people think and feel can sometimes transcend language.

Mick and Davies go a step further, resorting to violent or otherwise cruel actions to express themselves. Unlike Aston, who seems fairly openminded about Davies, Mick is suspicious of the old man from the beginning, and he expresses many of these suspicions by physically antagonizing Davies, such as when he steals Davies's trousers and refuses to give them back. At one point, Mick unscrews the lights in the room and waits in the darkness with the electrolux (vacuum cleaner) for Davies to enter, at which point he turns on the machine and severely frightens the unsuspecting Davies. Davies lashes out physically, as well: in the final scene of the play, Aston orders Davies to leave. But rather than confront Aston about this decision directly, Davies sputters nonsensically before pulling out his knife and pressing it to Aston's throat. In all of these instances, characters find language insufficient to express their dislike for one another, yet their actions make their feelings very clear.

The play also displays a repeated disconnect between characters' words and their actions, which emphasizes the limitations of language to convey a person's actual intentions. Davies talks incessantly about his plans to go to Sidcup to retrieve his identification papers, but as the play unfolds, it becomes obvious to everyone that he has no intention of actually doing so. Aston, meanwhile, talks longingly of his desire to build a shed out back and start a workshop there, yet he fails even to start this massive project. Similarly, Mick has ambitious dreams of finishing repairs on his building and living there with Aston. He describes in great detail to Davies all the objects and appliances he'll decorate the place with: "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." Despite the elaborate and evocative quality of Mick's words, he doesn't take any of the steps necessary to make his dream a reality—he can't even directly confront Aston about his failure to do the work he was supposed to do on the building. Further, Mick's repeated use of the conditional tense, listing the things he *would* do, gives his words a hypothetical quality, which emphasizes the disconnect between the things Mick talks about doing and the things he actually will do. All in all then, the play shows that there is a gap between the truth (that is, what people actually feel or intend

to do) and what language can realistically convey. In this sense, it implicitly echoes the old adage that "actions speak louder than words"—put another way, the play suggests that the way people *act* is more indicative of the truth than what they *say*.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### THE BUDDHA STATUE

The Buddha statue symbolizes Aston's fixation on objects, his inability to connect with others, and, in a broader sense, his (and everyone else's) inability to move beyond their present circumstances. Unlike the Buddha who, according to Buddhist teaching, achieved an enlightened state of present attentiveness devoid of self, suffering, and desire, Aston's preoccupation with the present is characterized by alienation, discomfort, and unfulfilled desire. The Buddha statue represents everything that Aston wants to (but cannot) become. Aston is calm, but not attentively so: his calmness is the result of the mental fogginess that exists as a side effect of his earlier electroshock therapy, which is a facet of himself and his history that he finds difficult to accept. Unlike the religious figure Aston's statue represents, Aston's calmness and immobility aren't a euphoric end state of enlightenment, but exemplify the unresolved fixations that prevent him from realizing his ambitions. Similarly, Aston's comments about the statue are typical of how he regards most other objects in the room: he thinks it's "quite nice" and "well made." The Buddha statue exhibits traits Aston would like to see in his own creations, but because Aston is never able to realize these creations (such as the woodshed, for example), the Buddha, along with many of the other objects that inhabit Aston's room, serve as embodiments of Aston's stalled, unfulfilled state.

When Mick smashes the Buddha in Act III, he enacts a chain of events that ends in Aston expelling Davies from their home once and for all. This is one of the only moments in the play in which a character takes steps to see his ambitions come to fruition. *The Caretaker* might be comically bleak for much of the play, but when Mick smashes the Buddha and Aston kicks Davies out of their home, Pinter optimistically suggests that it's still possible for people to direct their own lives, to make them meaningful and purposeful, and to find fulfillment.

### SHOES

Shoes symbolize the state of perpetual inaction that plagues Davies and exemplify the deeply contradictory and self-defeating qualities that keep him from taking any steps forward in his life. Davies simultaneously needs and rejects the help that others try to give him. For example, in Act I, Davies insists that he needs shoes to go to Sidcup to retrieve his identification papers, yet every time Aston offers Davies shoes, Davies rejects them on the grounds that they are too small, too uncomfortable, or too aesthetically displeasing. Davies then goes on to use his supposed lack of adequate shoes as an excuse to remain in Aston's home. Like Mick and Aston, Davies has ambitions, yet he repeatedly commits self-defeating acts that stand in the way of reaching them. Davies's attitude toward the shoes Aston offers him is indicative of his attitude toward life: that there will always be something—whether it be real or imagined—that stands in the way of his beginning to move forward. Whether it be the wrong color shoelaces, a pair of shoes with too-pointy toes, or the "foreigners" who supposedly take all the seats at the café, Davies repeatedly finds some excuse to continue in a perpetual state of inaction and malaise.

### THE BUCKET

The hanging bucket symbolizes the main characters' unsustainable shared tendency to project their anxieties, ambitions, and personalities onto external objects rather than reflecting internally or communicating with one another. With its incessant, maddening sound of dripping water, the bucket reminds the room's inhabitants of the passing of time and the ever-unresolved tension and malaise that grows between them. Aston hangs the bucket from the ceiling to catch that water that drips through the cracks in the roof. Instead of actually fixing the problem and tarring over the leaks in the ceiling, Aston pushes the problem down the road, offering a deferral of the problem in place of a solution. Likewise, their discussions about the bucket are themselves ways of deferring any genuinely productive communication, such as when Davies asks what they'll do when the bucket is full, to which Aston responds that they'll empty it, or when Mick questions Aston about whether emptying the bucket will really "do it." In this way, the bucket serves as a vessel for the characters' problems and anxieties, putting them aside and out of sight, but never completely out of mind.

Water drips into the bucket periodically throughout the entirety of the play, and all three men fixate on this at some point. The reader, too, is drawn to the bucket when either the dialogue or the stage directions draw their attention to the sound of dripping water. Thus, the persistent presence of the bucket serves as a reminder that the unresolved tensions and general malaise of the characters will not subside until real changes occur.

# QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dramatists Play Services, Inc. edition of *The Caretaker* published in 1962.

## Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ Ten minutes off for tea-break in the middle of the night in that place and I couldn't find a seat, not one. All them Greek had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it. And they had me working there…they had me working.

**Related Characters:** Davies (speaker), Aston

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 6

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs in the very beginning of the play, when Aston first brings Davies back to his room after intervening in a fight Davies was involved in at the café where Davies was working. Davies complains to Aston, explaining the events that led up to the fight. He was frustrated, as he wasn't able to secure a seat during his break at work that night, since all the seats were apparently occupied by foreigners: "All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it." Davies's frustrations stem from the fact that he believes himself to be superior to these supposed outsiders on the basis of race or ethnicity; he feels that he is obligated to a seat. Davies then proceeds to complain that "they had [him] working there," which he takes issue with on the basis that he doesn't believe he should have to take orders from people whom he views as inferior.

This is the reader's introduction to Davies, and it provides valuable insight into Davies's bigoted views and tendency to scapegoat other people for his problems in order to feel powerful and in control. What's ironic, though the reader doesn't know it yet, is that Davies's own nationality is up for debate. He assumes an array of false names and becomes very cagey when Aston asks him where he's from, which opens up the possibility that Davies himself might be one of the very foreigners he insists he is superior to. This lends another level of complexity and nuance to Davies's bigoted stance, suggesting that he deceives himself into thinking he is superior so that he might convince himself and others that he is worthy of respect and status in a world that places value on a person according to their nationality, class status, and economic contributions. Davies's willingness to lie about his nationality and berate other outsiders at the same time shows the lengths he is willing to go to be perceived as an insider.

❝ 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 as 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. (*Turns R.*) The pan for vegetables, it was. The vegetable pan. That's when I left her and I haven't seen her since. […] I've eaten my dinner off the best of plates.

**Related Characters:** Davies (speaker), Aston, Mick

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 7

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs in the beginning of the play, when Aston first brings Davies home to his room after rescuing Davies from a fight at the café. Davies is still riled up about the fight and the people he believes don't respect him. In his frustration, he makes a distinction between himself and the people he believes are out to get him, describing the latter as "toe-rags," (British slang for despicable people) and having "the manners of pigs." Implicit in Davies's berating of his enemies is the fact that he believes himself to be superior to those who insult him. It's still quite early in the play when Davies utters these lines, but as the action unfolds, it becomes clear to Aston (and to the reader) that Davies's insults and accusations in fact describe his own ill-mannered behavior.

Along these lines, Davies articulates his insecurities about being economically disadvantaged and without a home by stating, "I might have been on the road a few years but you can take it from me I'm clean. I keep myself up." Rather than admit that he's fallen on hard times and suffered as a consequence of this, Davies crafts a narrative in which he is still superior to the foreign people at the café, and, in spite of his unfortunate circumstances, he stays "clean." This isn't true either, though, as Davies has a disheveled appearance and Mick and Aston both complain about him smelling badly throughout the play. Davies creates a false narrative that he is a person of good taste, good manners, and good breeding, and someone whose apparent misfortune is due entirely to external people or forces.

Davies's failure to recognize that the poor manners of which he accuses the men at the café might just as easily be attributed to him illustrates the way he constructs his identity around a fictitious narrative in which he is a hapless martyr and the rest of the world is out to get him. Davies's condemnation of these supposed "toe-rags" comes as the result of misplaced blame. Davies is indeed a victim of systemic injustices (like poverty, classism, and prejudice against outsiders), but he instead blames individual people for his hard times and difficulties. By casting blame onto others and projecting his own insecurities and perceived failures, Davies avoids responsibility for his horrible behavior while still maintaining an illusion of control over his life.

This quote also presents Davies's questionable relationship to the truth. Davies purports himself to be a clean, upstanding citizen who has fallen on hard times and repeatedly encounters people who make his life even harder. But in reality, he embodies all the negative traits he admonishes: he is unclean, rude, and fails to "keep [him]self up." In emphasizing the asymmetry of Davies's words and the real world, the play suggests the potential for language to be empty and meaningless.

The last section of this passage contains a recollection of Davies's former marriage. Given Davies's tendency to spin elaborate, often untrue tales, the reader can't be certain that this story is true, or that Davies even had a wife. But, in addition to providing another example of the way Davies puts himself on a pedestal while unjustly admonishing others, the anecdote presents married life as something that is dirty and uncomfortable. This speaks to the difficulty of forming authentic, intimate connections in a modern world. That Davies associates his wife with a boiling pot of soiled clothing paints the close, intimate bond of marriage as something that is jarring, alienating, and wholly off-putting.

Shoes? It's life and death to me.

**Related Characters:** Davies (speaker), Aston

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 10

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs after Davies asks Aston for a pair of shoes. Aston looks through the many objects he hoards in his room and emerges with a pair of brown shoes, asserting that it's imperative to have a quality pair of shoes. Davies concurs, going a step further and saying that shoes are "life and death to [him.]" Davies's response is important because it introduces what will be one of his main plights throughout the course of the play: his unceasing quest for a suitable pair of shoes he can use to walk to Sidcup to retrieve the identifying papers he needs to get a job.

Davies's dramatic reply to Aston also showcases the style of language that is characteristic of Pinter's writing: Davies responds with a cliched statement that lends his words a certain superficiality and relative meaninglessness. Throughout *The Caretaker*, characters find themselves unable to communicate with each other. They often go on rambling, nonsensical tangents; change the subject before a topic of conversation can develop into something meaningful; responding with meaningless, empty cliched statements; or else abandoning language altogether and descending into silence or physical violence. All of this gives the sense that words are limited in their ability to convey people's true thoughts and feelings, and that trying express oneself through language will inevitably end in frustration in misunderstanding.

Another layer to this cliched response is that Davies really does mean what he says: shoes are "life and death" to him, since he is vagrant who walks everywhere, and since he regards external objects and situations as having complete control over what he does or doesn't do. Davies avoids any opportunity to author his own life and seems to lack the motivation to go to Sidcup, retrieve his papers, and earn an honest living. Instead, he leaves his fate up to external circumstances, telling himself and others that the reason he hasn't gone to Sidcup is because he doesn't have the right shoes to make the trek, or the weather wasn't suitable for walking. Davies has convinced himself (consciously or unconsciously) that shoes and, by extension, objects or situations, are responsible for his personal betterment, making the shoes genuinely a matter of "life and death" for him.

DAVIES. What's this?

ASTON. *(Aston crosses to L. of Davies. Davies hands him Buddha. Taking and studying it.)* That's a Buddha.

DAVIES. Get on.

ASTON. Yes. I quite liked it. Picked it up in a…in a shop. Looked quite nice to me. Don't know why. What do you think of these Buddhas?

DAVIES. Oh, they're…they're all right, en't they?

DAVIES. Yes, I was pleased when I got hold of this one. It's very well made.

**Related Characters:** Aston, Davies (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 13

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs as Aston and Davies are conversing in Aston's room shortly after arriving there from the café. Davies notices Aston's Buddha statue sitting on the stove and asks about it. The passage is important because it's the play's first direct address of the Buddha statue, which is one of the play's major symbols, representing Aston's tendency to project his fears, apprehensions, and ambitions onto objects. Like Aston, the Buddha is still and emits calmness and immobility. Unlike Aston, though, the Buddha's calmness is peaceful and contemplative, whereas Aston's immobility is something that torments him and prohibits him from genuinely understanding himself or others.

The passage is also important because it outlines how superficially Aston regards all the objects he hoards: they are simply things that "look[] quite nice" and that are "very well made" in a vague, indeterminate way. Aston talks about most of his objects in this manner, specifying only that he picked them up somewhere, likes them, and thinks they're of a good quality—but never anything more specific than this. Other than a vague admiration, his explanations of the objects lack any connection to himself: he never says what the objects mean to him, or what in him inspired him to pick them up. This is reflective of the play's larger point about how easy it is for people to misunderstand one another and themselves. Each character in the play remains opaque from start to finish, rarely speaking candidly with themselves or others, rarely revealing what they're truly thinking, and unable to speak in language that is not shallow or cliched.

DAVIES. *(With great feeling.)* If only the weather would break! Then I'd be able to get down to Sidcup!

**Related Characters:** Davies (speaker), Aston

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 15

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs on the evening that Aston brings Davies back to his home after rescuing Davies from a fight at a café. After listening to Davies grumble about his recent mishaps, lack of shoes, and general misfortune, Aston offers to let Davies sleep at his home until Davies can get things straightened out.

Davies's melodramatic lament about the weather references an earlier comment he made about looking into a few opportunities once the weather improves. When Davies cries "if only the weather would break!" he feigns disappointment at not being able to act on these plans, when in reality, he's likely all too enthusiastic to continue loafing around Aston's home in the meantime. The way Davies sees it, so long as the weather remains undesirable, he can continue to take advantage of Aston's generosity, remaining at Aston's home in a state of unmotivated malaise, procrastinating putting his life back together on the grounds that he *would* do something "if only the weather would break."

Davies's exclamation about going to Sidcup to get the papers he needs to get a job and get his life back on track will become a familiar refrain as the play unfolds. Davies continually bemoan the weather or his lack of shoes, reasoning that these setbacks are the only things that stand in his way of taking action and control over his life. In reality, though, it's his own purposelessness and indifference that encourages him to remain at a standstill and take advantage of Aston's hospitality. Davies's indifference toward improving his life and his tendency to attribute his personal failure to external things like the weather add to the play's general sense of meaninglessness.

Another reason Davies feigns disappointment about the weather is that the reason he needs to go to Sidcup is to retrieve his identifying papers, which would presumably contain facts about his personal history. Throughout the play, Davies remains cagey when he's asked about his past, birthplace, and nationality—becoming prickly, for example, when Aston asks him if he's Welsh. It's possible that Davies doesn't want to retrieve these papers because he doesn't

want to accept what they say about who he is, and which groups and opportunities he might be excluded from on the basis of his identity. Davies's unwillingness to embrace his identity—as well as his penchant for discriminating against *others* on the basis of identity—creates the sense that identity is largely determined by external factors (namely other people's opinions) rather than what a person thinks about themselves.

## Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

ASTON. You Welsh? (*Pause.*)

DAVIES. Well, I been around, you know… 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 set your mind back … going back … going back … a good way… lose a bit of track, like … you see what I mean….

**Related Characters:** Aston, Davies (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 20

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Davies tells Aston that his full name is (apparently) Mac Davies. Aston asks if Davies is Welsh, and Davies responds by avoiding the question rather than answering it directly. The awkwardness of this dialogue can be felt in the pause that follows Aston's initial question, as well as in Davies's meandering before he ultimately refuses to answer the question.

It's clear that Davies doesn't want Aston to know where he's from, likely because Davies, who has spent so much of the play insulting and berating foreigners, is himself an outsider. Davies's insecurity about his likely foreign origins, which is made clear through his inability to acknowledge them to himself and to Aston, shows how important it is for Davies to be considered an insider. He already feels that his position in Aston's home is volatile—after all, he doesn't actually belong here and would have no reason to be here if Aston hadn't generously invited him to stay. Davies's reluctance to reveal his national origins thus betrays his anxiety about being an outsider both on the larger scale (being an immigrant in a foreign land) and on a smaller scale (being a stranger in Aston's home).

## Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

MICK. Jen … kins. […] You remind me of my uncle's brother. He was always on the move, that man. Never without his passport. […] I think there was a bit of the Red Indian in him. (*Turns to face Davies.*) To be honest, I've never made out how he came to be my uncle's brother. I've often thought that maybe it was the other way round. I mean that my uncle was his brother and he was my uncle. But I never called him uncle. As a matter of fact I called him Sid. My mother called him Sid too. It was a funny business. Your spitting image he was. Married a Chinaman and went to Jamaica. (*Pause.*) I hope you slept well last night.

**Related Characters:** Mick (speaker), Davies, Aston

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 23-4

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs during Mick and Davies's first interaction with each other. Aston has just gone out; left alone, Davies immediately begins to root around in Aston's things, looking for something to steal. Unbeknownst to Davies, Mick enters the room, and, thinking that Davies is an intruder, accosts Davies.

Shortly after this, an odd exchange ensues, with both Mick and Davies talking more at each other than to each other. In this instance, Mick goes off on a long rant about the various people Davies reminds him of. The heavy amount of details—many of which don't seem all that critical to showing Davies how he is like Mick's "uncle's brother"—contribute to the sense that the dialogue in the play is nonsensical, absurd, and ineffective in its ability to communicate information to others. In this excerpt, Mick gives a long, highly detailed recollection of a man who is either his father or his uncle. Mick's recollection is largely irrelevant to the present moment, and it is only vaguely connection to Davies (it only concerns Davies because, according to Mick, Davies is like his "uncle's brother). So, the dialogue is beneficial to Mick only; in other words, Mick is talking *at* Davies rather than *to* him. Mick is talking because Mick wants to talk—not because he wants Davies to understand him. Throughout the play, characters often do a lot of talking without actually saying anything, and this is one of those moments. Passages like this one underscore language's limitations to communicate ideas to others or make oneself known to others.

Another important part of this passage concerns the man Mick might be talking about. One possible identity of a man

a person refers to as their "uncle's brother" is their father. If Mick is indeed talking about his father here, he does so in a very distant, indirect way. This emphasizes the alienation that exists between members of Mick's family. Beyond this, it presents relationships (such as those that exist within one's nuclear family) as intangible, impermanent, and uncertain. After Mick goes on a long, detailed rant about a man he insists is his "uncle's brother," he second guesses himself, revealing that he's "often thought that maybe it was the other way round. I mean that my uncle was his brother and he was my uncle. But I never called him uncle." The details that Mick originally stated as fact become not quite fiction, but still less than certain, undeniable fact. Mick's long, rambling, absurd tangent thus illustrates the alienation people can feel even in familial relationships, as well as the unreliability of words and the uncertainty of facts.

❝ You're stinking the place out. You're an old robber, there's no getting away from it. You're an old skate. You don't belong in a nice place like this. You're an old barbarian. Honest. You got no business wandering about in an unfurnished flat.

**Related Characters:** Mick (speaker), Davies, Aston

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 27

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs when Mick takes advantage of Aston's absence to confront the vagrant, Davies, whom Aston has invited into his home. In this confrontation, Mick goes back and forth between talking to Davies and berating him, as he does now. This passage represents Mick's immediate skepticism and judgment of Davies.

That Davies is "stinking the place out" becomes one of Mick's most common refrains in relation to Davies, and Aston later comes to use this phrase as shorthand for expressing the way Davies's negative attitude and deceptive manner negatively impact the room. Mick's words might be harsh, but they're not untrue: when Mick first encounters Davies, after all, Davies is in the process of assessing which of Aston's belongings would be worthwhile to steal.

Despite this, Mick's words express the opposite of what Davies purports himself to be. Whereas Davies tries to impress on everyone his cleanliness, earned status in society, identity an Englishman, and refined tastes, all of these qualities are false. He doesn't "belong in a nice place like this," as he spends all his time insulting the space and how Aston keeps it.

Another important component of Mick's insults in this passage is that they repurpose language Davies previously used to insult others, such as the patrons and employees of the café where he used to work but was fired from after getting into a fight that he likely instigated in the first place. Davies is often xenophobic and projects his own problems onto other people, insinuating that it is he who is repeatedly being wronged by the "skate[s]" and "barbarian[s]" of the world. But in fact, it's he who is the "skate" and "barbarian" who comes into people's lives and wreaks havoc on them, as Mick so bluntly puts it.

Another way of interpreting these lines is that they are an outer representation of what Davies probably thinks of himself on the inside. If Davies was honest with himself and with others, he'd probably agree with Mick's assessment. But because he is so desperate to be an insider—or, at least, to be perceived as one—he puts on airs and acts as though he deserves nicer accommodations than Aston has been able to offer him. He pretends that he is used to the fine things in life—and as though it is he who is the tormented, not the tormenter—in order to feel powerful and superior to others.

❝ MICK. […] You still got that leak.

ASTON. Yes. (*Pause. Gets plug from shelf.*) It's coming from the roof. (*looks up.*)

MICK. From the roof, eh?

ASTON. Yes. (*Pause.*) I'll have to tar it over.

MICK. You're going to tar it over?

ASTON. Yes.

MICK. What?

ASTON. The cracks. (*Pause.*)

MICK. You'll be tarring over the cracks on the roof.

ASTON. Yes. (*Pause.*)

MICK. Think that'll do it?

ASTON. It'll do it, for the time being.

MICK. Uh. (*Pause.*)

DAVIES. (*Abruptly.*) What do you do—? (*They both look at him.*) What do you do…when that bucket's full? (*Pause. Mick looks at Aston.*)

ASTON. Empty it. (*Pause.*)

**Related Characters:** Mick, Aston (speaker), Davies

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 28

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs after Aston returns to the room, interrupting Mick's confrontation of Davies. It's important because it introduces the reader to the dynamics of Mick and Aston's relationship. Though much of the dialogue in *The Caretaker* is stilted, circuitous, and repetitive, the exchange that occurs here between Mick and Aston is particularly so. For example, it requires an absurd number of back-and-forth exchanges to get to the bottom of a single, simple thought (that Aston is using the bucket to catch the water that falls through the cracks in the ceiling, which he has yet to repair).

The stilted, forced, and inefficient style of their conversation introduces the reader to Mick and Aston's estranged relationship. At this point in the play, Davies (and the reader) doesn't know that Mick is Aston's brother, and observing this stilted exchange certainly doesn't offer any clear hints that they're familiar with each other. On the contrary, their interactions here are distant and odd to the point that it would be reasonable to assume that they are complete strangers.

In addition to the stilted dialogue illustrating the distance that exists in Aston and Mick's relationship, the passage is also important in solidifying the bucket as an important symbol. Throughout the play, the hanging bucket symbolizes characters' shared tendency to project their anxieties and personalities onto external objects rather than reflecting internally or communicating with one another. In this instance, when Mick asks Aston about the bucket, it's a way for Mick to indirectly confront Aston about the Aston's failure to complete the repairs on the building that Mick asked him to do. Framing his concerns in terms of what the bucket does (rather than what Aston has not done) allows Mick to broach the subject of Aston's negligence without directly involving himself in an argument with Aston, which robs the brothers of an opportunity to communicate with each other and bridge the gap that exists between them.

Lastly, when Davies asks Mick and Aston what they will do when the bucket is full, and Aston answers that he'll "empty it" (as though this is the obvious and only solution), it shows Aston's acceptance that his problems and his life are beyond his control. His immediate, simple response is funny, but it's also rather bleak that Aston so readily dismisses the notion that he can address and exercise lasting control over the problems that plague his life. Symbolically, the most Aston can do to control his life is to play damage control, repeatedly emptying a-soon-to-be full-again bucket rather than exercising any real sort of change, like tarring over the cracks in the roof.

> DAVIES. Who was that feller?
>
> ASTON. He's my brother.
>
> DAVIES. Is he? He's a bit of a joker, en't he?
>
> ASTON. Uh.
>
> DAVIES. Yes…he's a real joker.
>
> ASTON. He's got a sense of humour.
>
> DAVIES. (*Crosses to chair, sits. Faces Aston.*) Yes, I noticed. (*Pause.*) He's a real joker, that lad, you can see that. (*Pause.*)
>
> ASTON. Yes, he tends…he tends to see the funny side of things.
>
> DAVIES. Well, he's got a sense of humour, en't he?
>
> ASTON. Yes.

**Related Characters:** Aston, Davies (speaker), Mick

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 30

**Explanation and Analysis**

This conversation (if one can call it that) occurs after Aston returns home from running errands to find Mick confronting Davies. Aston tries to give Davies a bag of his belongings, but Mick steals the bag from Davies's grasp, and a humorous sequence of events in which the three fight over and exchange the bag ensues. Finally, Mick surrenders and lets Davies have his things before leaving the room. In his absence, Davies tries to gossip about Mick with Aston.

Davies and Aston's conversation is significant for a few reasons. First of all, it exemplifies the aimlessness and absurdity of most conversations in the play. Davies is essentially talking *at* rather than *to* Aston: he prompts Aston to respond with what Davies wants him to say until Aston surrenders and does so, and then Davies confirms the things Aston said (the things Davies believes and wanted Aston to say), passing them off as his own, which they really were from the start.

The scene also shows how Davies takes advantage of

Aston's slow, reserved manner of speaking, which Davies later learns is the result of Aston's botched electroconvulsive therapy treatment. The brain damage he incurred causes him to have a hard time communicating and keeping track of his thoughts. The way that Davies carelessly takes advantage of Aston's agreeable, reserved personality to project the things he wants Aston to say onto him shows that Davies has no reservations about using people to get his way.

It's also interesting to consider this conversation within the context of Davies's later complaints about Aston not being a good conversationalist. Though Aston might be quiet and extremely reserved, it's not as though Davies is a stellar conversationalist. He might be verbose, but he is horrible at listening to and perceiving people's intentions and tends to project his words onto others and pretend that they agree with him.

When Aston later kicks Davies out of the room on the grounds that he makes too much noise, this is exactly what Aston is talking about: Davies talks to hear himself talk rather than to communicate with others. He has no interest in hearing others' opinions, only in having others confirm his opinions—or, at least, to *pretend* that others accept his opinions. This scene illustrates how language doesn't always have the ability to help people understand one another, particularly when people like Davies manipulate language to suit their own needs and confirm their own beliefs.

❝ ASTON. (*Crosses to window, looks out.*) Once I get that shed up outside … I'll be able to give a bit more thought to the flat, you see. Perhaps I can make one or two things for it. I can work with my hands, you see. That's one thing I can do. I never knew I could. But I can do all sorts of things now, with my hands. You know, manual things. When I get that shed up out there…I'll have a workshop, you see. I … could do a bit of woodwork. Simple woodwork, to start. Working with…good wood. […]

**Related Characters:** Aston (speaker), Davies, Mick

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 30

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs after Mick leaves the room and Aston informs Davies that Mick is Aston's brother. Aston then briefly mentions that Mick owns the building, and that Aston is supposed to be fixing up the place for him. Aston then walks to the window and speaks longingly of the shed he wants to build outside, explaining that, once he builds the shed, he'll "be able to give a bit more thought on the flat."

This passage is important because it illustrates the hypothetical, conditional logic that Aston so frequently employs when musing about the things he has to do or wants to do. He always frames things on his to-do list as things he *would* be able to accomplish, if only things were another way. In this instance, Aston believes he could better focus on the task of fixing up the flat (something he has to do for Mick), if only the wood shed was completed; only then would he be able to effectively accomplish that pressing task.

The way Aston talks about the shed also mirrors the way Davies talks about his shoes: just as Aston believes that completing the wood shed is what stands in the way of him completing the building work for Mick, Davies believes (or tries to make himself and others believe) that his lack of a suitable pair of walking shoes are what stand in the way of him returning to Sidcup, retrieving his documents, and getting a real job. Both characters project their failures onto objects, doubting (or, at least, outwardly denying) that it's their own inabilities that prevent them from doing the things they need to do.

Another important component about this passage is that it foreshadows Aston's later monologue about being forcibly institutionalized and receiving damaging electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). The reader might have caught on to the fact that Aston is rather reserved in his mannerisms and rarely—or with seeming difficulty—speaks, but Aston hasn't explicitly revealed what causes him to behave this way. When Aston mentions that he can "work with [his] hands," that this is the "one thing [he] can do," it gives the reader—and Davies—insight into Aston's condition, in which a botched ECT treatment made it difficult for him to keep track of his thoughts and interact with others.

The way Aston's musings develop is also significant. Aston begins his thoughts about the shed articulately, speaking in full sentences, making plans for the future. As he attempts to follow the thought to completion, however, his words begin to fail him, and he falters, not completing thoughts and sentences. His thoughts become less focused. He goes from stating that he'll do "a bit of woodwork," to "simple woodwork," to "working with…good wood." His train of thought deteriorates before he can complete it. In this way, the development of Aston's speech here parallels the way his ambitions develop in reality: he presents thorough,

ambitious, hypothetical goals for the future, but then he gets distracted in some manner and loses focus before he can complete the task at hand. As a result, his ambitions deteriorate before he can realize them.

One way that language and action interact in this play is that language (what the characters talk about doing) often does not match what actually happens. In this instance, Aston talks about building the shed, though he never acts on these words. This begins to suggest that people's actions tend to be more indicative of the truth than their words. Further, the language itself mirrors this inaction. In this case, Aston's sentence structure and grasp on his thoughts deteriorates before he can finish what he has to say, which is how his dreams play out in reality: he begins with a focused, clear idea of what he wants, but his plans gradually deteriorate into aimless, fragmentary, and repetitive gestures.

DAVIES. Yes ...well, I know about these sorts of shirts, you see. Shirts like these, they don't go far in the wintertime. I mean, that's one thing I know for a fact. No, what I need, is a kind of a shirt with stripes, a good solid shirt, with stripes going down. That's what I want. [...]

**Related Characters:** Davies (speaker), Aston

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 31

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote occurs after Davies looks inside the bag of his belongings that Aston supposedly picked up from the café where Davies left it the night before. Davies realizes the bag isn't his, and Aston admits that he couldn't find Davie's bag, so he picked up another instead. Davies inspects the contents of the bag and comments on each item, focusing in particular on a shirt he pulls out. His shallow criticism of the shirt's aesthetic qualities illustrates how he puts on airs to seem more cultured or of a higher class than he actually is: he wants to give Aston the impression that he knows a lot about fashion and good quality clothing, so he criticizes the shirt by offering a visualization of the shirt he'd much rather have: one with "stripes, a good solid shirt, with stripes going down."

Of course, it's absurd and self-defeating for Davies to do this, given that the stage directions dictate that Davies doesn't even *have* a shirt—only an overcoat. He is a homeless, unemployed beggar, yet he criticizes the shirt Aston so generously gives him on the grounds that it doesn't suit his tastes. At first it might seem as though Davies is criticizing the suitability of the shirt for colder weather when he says shirts like this one "don't go far in the wintertime." Though it's rude of Davies to take issue with Aston's generosity, it at least makes sense for Davies to assess the few things he has in terms of their practicality: as a transient beggar who wanders about incessantly, it really is important that he has warm, good quality clothing. However, it's not the shirt's quality he criticizes, but its looks: he'd rather have a striped shirt, of a "good solid" quality.

Davies lies to himself and others, projecting an identity that he is discerning, used to a higher quality of material goods, in order to give the impression that he is of a higher class than he actually is. "I know about these sorts of shirts, you see," he assures Aston, wanting to make sure Aston recognizes him as a cultured man of the world. Davies's grandiose behavior that makes him both repulsive and amusing to watch: he foolishly believes that he is putting on a good show, not knowing that his self-defeating attempts at appearing sophisticated are, in fact, the real show.

## Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

MICK. No, he just doesn't like work, that's his trouble.

DAVIES. Is that a fact?

MICK. It's a terrible thing to have to say about your own brother.

DAVIES. Ay.

MICK. He's just shy of it. Very shy of it.

DAVIES. I know that sort.

MICK. You know the type?

DAVIES. I've met them.

MICK. I mean, I want to get him going in the world.

DAVIES. Stands to reason, man.

**Related Characters:** Mick, Davies (speaker), Aston

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 36-7

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs when Mick and Davies are in the room together. Mick has just purposely frightened Davies, unscrewing the lights and revving the vacuum cleaner when Davies couldn't see anything in the dark. The men reconcile

in a superficial manner, with Mick handing Davies half his sandwich as a peace offering. As they sit and eat, Mick discloses to Davies his frustrations about Aston and his supposed lack of work ethic, conveniently leaving out the fact that it's not solely Aston's poor work ethic that prevents him from working, but also a traumatic experience in a mental institution that left him permanently disabled.

This passage is important because it illustrates how both characters withhold information from the other to benefit themselves: Mick withholds information about Aston's condition in an effort to make his own plight, and not Aston's, more sympathetic to an outsider. Davies, meanwhile, pretends to "know" and have "met" the lazy type of person Mick makes out Aston to be in an effort to get Mick on his side. In reality, however, Davies is the very man that Mick is describing: "he doesn't like work" and does everything in his power to avoid doing it, from insisting that he doesn't have the right shoes to complaining about the weather. However, he sees an opportunity to ingratiate himself with Mick by siding with Mick in his complaints about Aston and pretending that he is not one of the men about whom Mick would complain. This shows how manipulative Davies can be and how he lies in order to move forward in life. Yet, in the end, this tactic only makes Davies less likeable and worthy of respect in Mick's eyes, suggesting that trying to deceive people in this way is an exercise in futility.

> DAVIES. I was saying, he's … he's a bit of a funny bloke, your brother. (*Mick stares at him.*)
>
> MICK. Funny? Why?
>
> DAVIES. Well … he's funny. …
>
> MICK. What's funny about him? (*Pause.*)
>
> DAVIES. Not liking work.
>
> MICK. (*Rises.*) What's funny about that?
>
> DAVIES. (*Slow turn to Mick.*) Nothing. (*Pause.*)
>
> MICK. (*Crosses to Davies.*) I don't call it funny.
>
> DAVIES. Nor Me.
>
> MICK. You don't want to start getting hypercritical.

**Related Characters:** Davies, Mick (speaker), Aston

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 37

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs immediately after Mick confides in Davies that Aston's poor work ethic sometimes annoys him. Trying to get Mick on his side in an effort to win Mick over and, potentially, solidify his spot in Mick's building, Davies agrees with Mick's critical assessment of Aston, noting that Aston's "not liking work" is "funny." Mick doesn't respond as Davies expects he will, however, and immediately objects to what he sees as a slight against Aston.

Neither the reader (nor Davies) knows about Aston's mental condition at this point, but Davies's insult of "funny" strikes Mick as insensitive because it alludes to Aston's mental illness. Mick's immediately cold response to Davies's ignorant joke shows that, despite Mick's annoyance with Aston and their outwardly distant relationship, Mick maintains an intimacy and obligation to his brother. The way Mick turns on Davies here foreshadows his (and Aston's) final decision to expel Davies from their home: both are grounded in a respect and obligation toward each other as equals or insiders, and a rejection of an outsider.

Aston is someone whose reserved personality and inability to quickly form his thoughts and words means that he isn't himself capable of manipulation and is unusually vulnerable to it. Mick, on the other hand, is quicker on his feet and willing and able to beat Davies at his own game, using manipulative language to keep Davies on his toes and prevent him from becoming the privileged insider Davies so badly wants to be.

> MICK. I'll be quite open with you. I could rely on a man like you around the place, keeping an eye on things.
>
> DAVIES. Well now … wait a minute … I … I ain't never done no caretaking before, you know….
>
> MICK. Doesn't matter about that. It's just that you look a capable sort of man to me.
>
> DAVIES. I am a capable sort of man. I mean to say, I've had plenty of offers in my time, you know, there's no getting away from that.
>
> MICK. Well, I could see before, when you took out that knife, that you wouldn't let anyone mess about.
>
> DAVIES. No one messes me about, man. […]

**Related Characters:** Mick, Davies (speaker), Aston

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 38

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs immediately after Mick asks Davies to be the building's caretaker. The placement of Mick's offer is curious, since Mick was just furious with Davies for talking badly about Aston. The ease with which Mick shifts from being upset with Davies to wanting to do him a favor suggests that, perhaps, Mick is manipulating Davies as much as Davies is trying to manipulate Mick and Aston. This sort of contradiction is one of the ways in which *The Caretaker* is absurd: characters' actions are often nonsensical, counterintuitive, and unpredictable. Mick, in particular, seems to oscillate between contentedness and anger with no rhyme or reason—or, at least, with very little warning.

Another important aspect of this passage is that it illustrates how inauthentically Davies behaves. For example, when Mick initially proposes the idea that Davies can be the caretaker, Davies is hesitant: "Well now…wait a minute…I…I ain't never done no caretaking before, you know," he sputters, perhaps weary of the actual work that being the caretaker might entail. However, as soon as Mick butters Davies up by praising him as "a capable sort of man," Davies completely changes his tune, affirming that he is in fact "a capable sort of man," affirming Mick's observation so fully that he even goes so far as to mimic the exact language Mick uses to describe him: "a capable sort of man."

It's clear to Davies—and probably to Mick, too—that Davies is far from a capable sort of man; however, he knows that his ability to stay in Mick's house is predicated on him being the sort of person Mick wants him to be, so he seizes on the opportunity to conform to Mick's expectations and, in so doing, stay on Mick's good side, which will increase his chances of becoming a respected insider at Mick's house rather than a mistrusted, devalued outsider.

That Davies uses language to assent to Mick's positive perception of him—despite the fact that this perception isn't true—shows that language can be used deceptively, and that a person's sense of self is greatly influenced by how others view them. Indeed, it's only after Mick praises Davies that Davies agrees to be the caretaker. This suggests that Davies's outlook on life—and to a broader extent, his whole reality—is molded not around reality, but around what others think of him. There's no authentic truth for Davies, only a performed, impermanent one. Before Mick praised him, he had no incentive to be the caretaker.

## Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

❝ DAVIES. (*Crosses to L. of Aston.*) Yes, but what about me? What…what you got to say about my position? (*Pause.*)

**Related Characters:** Davies (speaker), Aston

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 40

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during an argument between Aston and Davies. It's morning, and Aston has woken up Davies and cautiously tries to tell Davies that he had been making noises in his sleep yet again. But Davies interrupts Aston to go on a rant about how he can't sleep with the window open, the draught coming in, and the rain falling onto his head. Aston tries to stand his ground, arguing that it gets too stuffy in the room to sleep when the window is closed, but Davies counters this with the quintessentially Davies melodramatic retort of "Yes but what about me?"

This quote is important because it succinctly captures a key component of Davies's character, which is his perpetual self-centeredness. Despite the fact that he is a guest in Aston's house and ought to conform to Aston's way of doing things, he refuses to entertain Aston's request to leave the window open even for a moment, choosing instead to turn Aston's small request into a full-on attack on his quality of life. Davies takes on this "what about me?" attitude in every aspect of his life, not just with Aston. He believes that he is a victim in every situation and is bigoted, blaming foreigners for taking up all the space at the bar and for having no manners. In this way, Davies avoids taking responsibility and projects his troubles onto other people in order to feel superior and in control. But, of course, this doesn't actually solve any of Davies problems—it only reinforces his stagnancy and laziness.

Indeed, because Davies views himself as tormented and everyone else as his tormentors, he fails to recognize opportunities where he could improve his situation by altering his own actions. When Aston later points out that Davies could simply change the position of his head to prevent the rain from hitting him, Davies will hear none of it. He won't consider changing his position—literally or figuratively. He selfishly expects the world to bend to his every need, while he remains inert, expending zero effort.

❝ You've got … this thing. That's your complaint. And we've decided, he said, that in your interests there's only one course we can take. He said…he said, we're going to do something to your brain. He said…if we don't you'll be in here for the rest of your life, but if we do, you stand a chance. You can go out, he said, and live like the others.

**Related Characters:** Aston (speaker), Davies

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 42

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote occurs during Aston's tragic monologue—the climax of the play—in which he recalls the forced institutionalization he experienced as a young person. Aston suffered from hallucinations when he was younger, and when he revealed this to people at a café he used to spend time at, they passed along this information to others, which resulted in Aston being sent to a mental hospital against his will. In this excerpt from Aston's monologue, he recalls what the doctor told him about his mental ailment.

The gist of the doctor's explanation is that Aston's illness alienates him from the rest of the world: "this thing" that is wrong in Aston's brain prevents him from "living like the others," and if Aston is treated for this malady, he'll "stand a chance" at living a normal life, in which he can communicate with and understand others. The irony of the doctor's words is that communicating with people is what led Aston to be in this position in the first place: he confided in people he thought were his friends, but these friends betrayed him.

What's further ironic is that the very operation that was supposed to help Aston only makes it *more* difficult for him to communicate in the present: the electroconvulsive therapy the doctor performed to supposedly cure Aston's mental illness ended up permanently damaging his brain, making it difficult for Aston to keep his thoughts straight and maintain conversations. His brain damage makes him quiet and withdrawn, and it greatly limits his abilities to relate to others.

The incorrectness of the doctor's words here gives the sense that language is often meaningless, and that alienation is inevitable. Basically, Aston is damned either way: he would have been alienated if he hadn't received the treatment, either because he'd be locked away in the institution or because he'd be tortured by his own hallucinations. But to avoid this literal sort of alienation, Aston is subjected to treatments that muddy his sense of self, weaken his grasp on his thoughts, and impair his ability to speak to others. When the doctor says that the operation will allow Aston to "live like the others," it's almost as though the play is making a wry joke about how Aston's operation actually has made him like others, in that an inability to communicate and express oneself is an inevitable part of human life.

> The trouble was ... my thoughts ... had become very slow ... I couldn't think at all ... I I couldn't ... get ... my thoughts ... together ... uuuhh ... I could ... never quite get it ... together. The trouble was, I couldn't hear what people were saying. I couldn't look to the right or the left, I had to look straight in front of me, because if I turned my head round ... I couldn't keep ... upright. And I had these headaches. I used to sit in my room. That was when I lived with my mother. And my brother. He was younger than me. And I laid everything out, in order, in my room, all the things I knew were mine, but I didn't die. The thing is, I should have been dead. I should have died. Anyway, I feel much better now. But I don't talk to people now. I steer clear of places like that café. I never go into them now. I don't talk to anyone ... like that.

**Related Characters:** Aston (speaker), Mick, Davies

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 43-44

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage occurs in the midst of Aston's monologue about his past experiences with being forcibly institutionalized for having hallucinations and receiving electroconvulsive therapy that left him permanently brain damaged. This excerpt occurs at the very end of Aston's speech and explains the negative side effects he suffered as a result of the procedure. Most debilitating to Aston is the treatment's effects on his ability to keep track of his own thoughts, as well as on his ability to interact with others.

Beyond the treatment's physical effects on Aston, the entire experience seems to have left him reticent and afraid to engage with others, fearing that he will be betrayed again if he expresses his authentic self. Aston almost thinks of his treatment as a punishment for opening up to others, being forced to live out the remainder of his life in a state of perpetual alienation. Aston's treatment, side effects of that treatment, and the way he contemplates these tragic details of life speaks to several key ideas that the play puts forth: that modern life is inherently alienating and fraught with misunderstanding, that identity is fragile and impermanent, and that language is limited in its ability to convey the truth.

When Aston expresses that he "should have died" after his procedure but did not, he implies that the alienating life his brain damage confines him to is almost not worth living. That Aston follows up this bleak assertion by insisting that he "feel[s] much better now" suggests that he's resigned himself to accepting that this is the way his life will be from now on: devoid of meaningful social interaction, a rich, contemplative sense of self, and all the other good things that come from having a strong grasp on one's thoughts and

emotions.

## Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ You can't live in the same room with someone who … who don't have any conversation with you.

**Related Characters:** Davies (speaker), Aston, Mick

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 46

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Davies complains to Mick about what bad company Aston is, particularly about how irritating it is to share a room with him. Davies especially takes issue with Aston's reserved demeanor and apparent inability to hold down a conversation.

Davies's words are cruel and ironic. They are cruel given when they take place in the play, immediately following Aston's dramatic and tragic confession about his forced stay in a mental hospital and the treatment that left him brain damaged and now makes it hard to interact with others and keep track of his thoughts. In fact, Aston's admitting this to Davies is the first real attempt any character has made to be authentic and vulnerable with another person; thus far, everyone's language has been limited to the shallow, trivial and banal. So, for Davies to criticize Aston's inability to have a conversation at this particular moment is not only cruel, but it's incorrect: Aston is trying to the best of his ability to communicate authentically—which is more than Davies can say of himself.

After Aston reveals this personal moment from his history to Davies, Davies does not respond with sympathy and understanding, but with cruelty, using Aston's admission as fodder for criticizing him behind his back to Mick. Beyond the irony and cruelty of Davies's words lies the idea that it's difficult to truly connect with others through language, and that acknowledging this truth is painful and frustrating.

❝ Furniture … mahogany and rosewood. Deep azure-blue carpet, unglazed blue and white curtains, a bedspread with a pattern of small blue roses on a white ground, dressing-table with a lift-up top containing a plastic tray, table lamp of white raffia […] it wouldn't be a flat it'd be a palace.

**Related Characters:** Mick (speaker), Aston, Davies

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 47

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs during a conversation between Mick and Davies that occurs in Aston's absence. Davies has been complaining to Mick about how difficult it is to live with Aston, citing Aston's inability to have a real conversation with him as well as Aston's refusal to take care of the building, leaving everything to become dirty.

Davies's complaints inspire Mick to divulge some complaints of his own, and he seconds Davies's frustration about Aston letting the building fall into disrepair. He follows up these complaints with musings about what he wants to do with the place but cannot, due to Aston's lack of cooperation in the projects of rebuilding and redecorating. This passage is excerpted from Mick's much longer speech about all the intricate decorating he'd like to do to his home. The level of detail with which Mick discusses his dreams for the building are evidence of his fervent longing to make these dreams a reality. He speaks of "furniture…mahogany and rosewood," of "deep azure-blue carpet, unglazed blue and white curtains, a bedspread with a pattern of small blue roses on a white ground," among many other things that depict a home that is refined, luxurious, and purposefully composed.

Mick concludes his vivid description of his ideal home by noting that "it wouldn't be a flat it'd be a palace." Like the other characters of the play, Mick believes that his worth as a person is derived from an outward appearance of prosperity and refined taste. It's for this reason that he so badly wants to make the flat "a palace." But this passage only makes the prospect of becoming wealthy and living in luxury seem less likely to happen, as it makes the distinction between what Mick desires his building to become (a palace) and the reality of his situation all the more obvious. The building is only a flat that's in disrepair due to Aston's neglect of it, and the impossibility of Mick's dreams highlights the absurdity of a society in which disadvantaged, downtrodden people like Aston and Mick are valued for only for their class status and capacity for work—things that are largely out of their control.

## Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

I've seen better days than you have, man. Nobody ever got me inside of them places, anyway. I'm a sane man! So don't you start mucking me about. I'll be all right as long as you keep your place. Just you keep your place, that's all. Because I can tell you, your brother's got his eye on you. […] He knows all about you. I got a friend there, don't you worry about that. I got a true pal there. Treating me like dirt! Why'd you invite me in here in the first place if you was going to treat me like this? You think you're better than me you got another thing coming. I know enough. They had you inside one of them places before, they can have you inside again. Your brother's got his eye on you!

**Related Characters:** Davies (speaker), Aston, Mick

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 51-2

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Aston complains about Davies making noise in his sleep. Davies lashes out at Aston, and, in the process, uses Aston's earlier admission against him, citing Aston's mental condition as evidence that Aston is inferior to him. Despite the fact that Davies is in no position to feel that he is above Aston (Davies has no job, no money to his name, and beyond all this, is rude, conniving, and manipulative), he uses the one thing he has over Aston to beat down the man who has been nothing but generous and patient with him. Davies further demonstrates his manipulative behavior here by claiming that Mick's "got his eye on [Aston]" and is prepared to kick Aston out of the house because of his condition, despite the fact that Mick has never expressed any such thing to Davies.

Davies's words are misplaced and would be more reasonable coming from Aston: "Treating me like dirt!" is something Davies has done to Aston, not the other way around. Further, when Davies insinuates that Aston thinks he's better than [Davies]," he's really projecting his own feelings onto Aston: it's Davies who thinks he's better than Aston, not the other way around. Davies projects his own moral failings onto Aston who, due to the brain damage he incurred, is unresponsive and has no choice but to absorb all the misplaced qualities Davies throws his way.

Davies's misplaced, projective anger toward Aston expresses the play's recurring ideas about the inauthenticity of identity: Davies becomes detached from who he really is and projects his moral failings onto Aston. The incorrectness of his speech—and the irony of it—also implies that language can obscure the truth rather than clarifying it. Davies isn't really communicating anything real to Aston, only spewing his own shortcomings and frustrations onto Aston in a misplaced, reactive way.

You've been stinking the place out.

**Related Characters:** Aston (speaker), Davies, Mick

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 53

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Davies berates Aston when Aston complains about Davies making noises in his sleep. Davies claims that Mick is on Davies's side and will have Aston recommitted to the mental institution. This is the last straw for Aston, who tells Davies that it's time for Davies finds a new place to leave, explaining that he must leave because he's "been stinking the place out."

This is an insult that both Aston and Mick use against Davies, which implies that although the brothers appear to be emotionally distant, there remains an underlying sense of familial comradery and obligation to each other. Aston uses Mick's words and, by extension, Mick's support, to have the strength to banish Davies from his home. Even though Mick isn't in the room with Aston when he utters these words, the fact that it's a phrase Mick and Aston share creates a figurative closeness between the two brothers. This is also a rare instance of truthful, self-affirming language in a play that, up until this point, has repeatedly highlighted the potential meaninglessness of language.

That Aston uses Mick's words to banish Davies also positions Mick and Aston as allies and Davies as the outsider they are working against, which completely flips Davies's accusation that on its head: it's not Davies and Mick who are scheming to get Aston kicked out and locked in the institution, but Mick and Aston who are scheming to kick Davies out of their home. Furthermore, Aston confirms everything about Davies that Davies wishes weren't true: that he's poor, smelly, and worthless in the eyes of people who are superior to him in terms of class and social status. It's a major shift in his character that the previously mild-mannered, nearly mute Aston stands his ground to Davies, who has done nothing but bully and mock Aston for the entirety of the play.

## Act 3, Scene 3 Quotes

What a strange man you are. Aren't you? You're really strange. Ever since you came into this house there's been nothing but trouble. Honest. [...] I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations. [...] Most of what you say is lies. You're violent, you're erratic, you're just completely unpredictable. You're nothing else but a wild animal, when you come down to it. You're a barbarian. And to put the old tin lid on it, you stink from arse-hole to breakfast time.

**Related Characters:** Mick (speaker), Davies, Aston

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 57

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Mick confronts Davies about insulting Aston by calling him funny. In so doing, Davies has crossed a line that Mick finds to be unacceptable, so he attacks Davies in a more direct, sustained manner than he has previously. Most of Mick's previous attacks on Davies have been either brief or limited to physical pranks, such as when he frightened Davies with the electrolux, or when he tried to keep his bag and trousers from him.

Mick's insults here echo some of the sentiments he's expressed about Davies from the very beginning, namely that he "stink[s]." He goes into greater detail here, though, elaborating that Davies "stink[s] from arse-hole to breakfast time." This confrontation is important because it's an example of the play's limited number of direct, explicit moments of communication between characters: Mick isn't hiding behind opaqueness, mincing his words, or choosing violence over language. He's coming clean with Davies and letting him know what he really feels.

However, something that complicates Mick's words is that they might just as readily be used to describe Mick himself: Mick claims of Davies that he can "take nothing you say at face value," and that he's essentially a "wild animal." While much of this is true about Davies, it's really Mick who is best defined by his violence and unpredictability, given his repeated physical attacks on Davies and his tendency to switch moods, sides, and subjects with little notice. Mick's criticism of Davies is therefore suggestive of his own blindness to or repression of his personal shortcomings—which, in a way, aligns him with Davies, who also refuses to accept his flawed personality traits.

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 plenty of 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'm moving ... 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.

**Related Characters:** Mick (speaker), Aston, Davies

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 58

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs immediately after Mick hurdles Aston's Buddha statue to the floor in frustration. Mick expresses the disconnect that exists between his dreams and his reality. This is most evident in the incompatibility of, on the other hand, his desire to fix up the building and improve his business, and on the other, his desire to look after Aston and help him live a worthwhile life.

What makes Mick burst out in legitimate, unhinged anger here is that he sees the futility of trying to accomplish both goals, and that in giving up one, he dooms his ability to achieve the other. If Mick is in the building business as he and Aston say he is, it's counterproductive and absurd of him to abandon his own building in order to pay more attention to his business—especially when his business ironically involves the fixing of buildings.

There's no sensible way for these two things to exist independently of each other: if Mick abandons his building, he also abandons his business. But if he continues to worry about his house, he is prevented from building up his business. Furthermore, Mick's attempt to support his brother by giving him a job of fixing up the building all but ensures that the building will never get fixed. Mick's support of Aston does not free him up to pursue his business, then; on the contrary, it perpetuates and maintains the state of inertia that so frustrates Mick.

You make too much noise.

**Related Characters:** Aston (speaker), Davies, Mick

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 59

### Explanation and Analysis

This is Aston's final line of the play, in which he defiantly exiles Davies from his home. This is a significant moment in Aston's character development, as he's spent the entirety of the play being overly caring, forgiving, and patient with Davies's rudeness and cruelty. Davies's mocking Aston over his past institutionalization and threatening to convince Mick to have him recommitted seems to be Aston's breaking point. But Mick's support also seems to bolster Aston's ability to finally stand up for himself and expel his tormentor.

Right before Aston delivers these lines, after Mick smashes the Buddha statue, Aston and Mick exchange a silent, knowing smile as Mick leaves the room. This is the most significant moment of communication the brothers have had for the entirety of the play (they don't speak to each other at all and hardly acknowledge each other before this). The smile thus signifies the possibility that they might be able to bridge the alienating gap that has widened between them since the electroshock procedure that left Aston brain-damaged, which seems to have strained his relationship with Mick. The promise of purpose and support that this silent smile carries gives Aston the strength to follow up his verbal rejection of Davies with actionable consequence when he expels Davies from the room. Up until this point, the characters have often talked about big plans they have (such as Aston wanting to build the shed, or Mick wanting to fix up his building), but these words are often empty and hypothetical, never leading to an actual action. Here, though, Aston makes good on his words and actually forces Davies to leave the building.

After Aston speaks these lines, he literally and figuratively turns his back on Davies, facing the window while Davies pathetically tries to protest as he makes his way toward the door. This final scene is narratively satisfying in the sense that Davies arguably deserves to be kicked out of Aston's home after the way he's treated Aston—yet there's also something inconclusive and tragic about how things end up. Davies likely will return to his life of misery as a drifter. And when Aston looks out the window, presumably toward the wood he wants to use to build the shed, one gets the sense that he, too, will return to his old ways of longing and dreaming for an ever-hypothetical, unattainable future. In short, despite Aston's brief respite from his usual malaise and passivity that his connection with Mick offers him, things are fated to carry on as meaninglessly and statically as they were before.

# SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## ACT 1, SCENE 1

Mick is alone in a room, which contains his and Aston's beds, some boxes, suitcases, a set of drawers, some old kitchen appliances, and many other objects. A statue of **Buddha** sits on the stove. There's a single window, and a **bucket** hangs from the ceiling. Mick looks around the room at everything surrounding him before gazing at the bucket.

*Mick might be alone, but his cluttered surroundings give the sense that his solitude is chaotic and stressful rather than peaceful. The fact that Mick stares at the bucket draws the reader's attention to this particular object, suggesting that it might have some additional layer of meaning. Another important aspect of this opening scene is its silence, which sets the stage for the play's examination of the inadequacy of language.*

As Mick stands to approach the **bucket**, there's a bang at a door outside the room, and he can hear voices. Hurriedly, Mick turns off the light and walks out the door. As the voices draw nearer, the door opens, and Aston and Davies enter the room that Mick just left. Aston wears a worn, brown suit, an old overcoat, and a faded shirt and tie. Davies wears an old overcoat and pants, sandals, and no shirt.

*Mick hastily leaves the room, seemingly because he doesn't wish to interact with Aston and Davies, which suggests that he is emotionally distant from the other two men and would prefer to be alone. Aston and Davies's old, frumpy clothes show that they are of a lower class, or at least not wealthy. Though both men are dressed shabbily, Davies's inadequate shoes (sandals) and lack of a shirt imply that he is worse off than Aston.*

Davies inspects the room. Aston instructs him to sit down, bringing forward a chair. Davies grumbles about not being able to sit down on his tea-break at night because all the seats were taken by "Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them[.]" Meanwhile, Aston sits on the bed, lights a cigarette, and offers the tin of tobacco to Davies.

*Davies's remarks about immigrants and Black people characterize him as prejudiced toward people he views as outsiders (in this case, Eastern Europeans, Southern Europeans, and non-white people). In addition, his comments characterize him as someone who tends to blame other people or outside circumstances for his misfortune.*

Davies recounts almost getting jumped by a man at the café tonight. Aston picks up a plank of wood and a screwdriver and fiddles with the objects, unscrewing a screw on the plank. Davies accuses the men who mistreated him of having "the manners of pigs." Even though Davies has "been on the road a few years," he insists that he, unlike these men, is "clean," which is something he takes great pride in. Davies recalls how he left his wife when, shortly after they were married, he found a pile of her unwashed clothing simmering in a saucepan on the stove.

*That Aston tinkers with random objects rather than sympathize with Davies shows that he is hesitant—or unable—to communicate with others. It's unclear whether Aston condones or objects to what Davies is saying, but either way, it seems like Aston doesn't think words can properly convey what he's thinking. This begins suggest that language is limited in its ability to express people's complicated thoughts and emotions, an idea that the play will touch on repeatedly. Davies's remarks about being "clean" are ironic and humorous, given that he's both literally unclean (in that he has a disheveled appearance) and morally unclean (in his prejudice toward others and habit of getting into fights). The fact that he berates the men at the café for supposedly having "the manners of pigs" and accuses his former wife of being unclean again suggests that Davies plays the victim and scapegoats other people in order to feel more powerful. But given that Davies seems downtrodden and alludes to a failed marriage here, this mindset seems to cause more problems than it solves.*

Davies stands up, walks across the room, and inspects **the Buddha statue**. He continues to complain to Aston, ranting about his old age and health. He asks if Aston witnessed his attack at the café tonight. Aston admits that he only saw the tail end of it, so Davies fills Aston in on the beginning, recounting how a man at work ordered him to bring a garbage pail out back, even though this task isn't Davies's responsibility. Davies resents having to take orders from someone of "the same standing" as him. Aston asks if the man was "a Greek," but Davies says that he was actually "a Scotchman."

*Aston seems hesitant to respond to Davies, which might suggest that Davies's fight didn't occur quite as Davies is depicting it—for example, it's possible that Davies instigated the fight with the men, and not the other way around. If this is the case, Aston's decision not to overtly correct Davies suggests that he wants to avoid confrontation, which could mean that Aston fears unfiltered, candid communication—perhaps because he's used to people misunderstanding what he says. Davies's complaints reveal an inferiority complex of sorts: he hates taking orders from people he believes are of a lower social status than him, which could be because he's insecure about his own status. Aston's question about whether the man was "a Greek" suggests that categorizing people by their nationality was commonplace in 1950s British society, and that Eastern Europeans (like the "Poles" Davies referred to earlier) and Southern Europeans (like Greeks) were generally looked down upon.*

Aston approaches the mantle and picks up a box filled with plugs. Aston examines a plug as Davies continues to complain about his experiences at the café. He also complains about getting fired for "making too much commotion," asserting that he was only exercising his "rights"—of which he has plenty, despite the fact that he's homeless. Davies sits down and laments how he would've been hurt badly if Aston hadn't interfered in the fight, and he resolves to retaliate against the Scotchman someday. Aston selects a plug from the box and brings it to the bed to fix it. Davies complains about having left all his belongings at work, and Aston offers to drop by sometime to retrieve them for Davies.

*Aston continues to pay more attention to random objects in the room than to Davies, which underscores the extent of his social isolation and shows that he is uneasy about speaking too freely. This again suggests that, at least for Aston, language is limited in its ability to accurately convey thoughts and emotions. Meanwhile, Davies seems determined to appear powerful and in the possession of numerous "rights," even though his status as a homeless person would suggest that he is lacking in the power that can come with a higher class status. It stands to reason that Davies wants to seem prominent and successful because people in the society of the play judge people's worth by their class status—otherwise, he probably wouldn't care about how others perceive him.*

Davies thanks Aston for letting him rest in his home and remarks on all the clutter, though he notes that something in the room might be worth some money. Davies changes the subject, complaining about the room being "draughty." He asks Aston if there are other rooms in the building. Aston explains that the other rooms aren't habitable and need massive repairs, revealing that he's "in charge" of the building. Davies, having noticed some heavy curtains across one of the doors in the building, asks Aston if he's a landlord. Aston explains that a "family of Indians live" behind the curtains. Davies asks if they're "Blacks." Aston doesn't quite answer, insisting only that he "don't see much of them."

*With his unnecessary comment about the messy, "draughty" state of Aston's room, Davies reveals himself to be a rather rude, ungrateful house guest. Perhaps in saying this, Davies is trying to implicitly signal to Aston that he is used to nicer accommodations, though this can't possibly be the case (at least, not recently), as Davies is a homeless drifter. So, again, Davies is trying to make himself seem more well-off than he actually is in order to feel more powerful. Meanwhile, the reader finally gains insight about Aston: he is "in charge" of the building, though it's not entirely clear what this means. Aston's comment, combined with his habit of fiddling with tools, might imply that he is a handyman, or perhaps the titular caretaker. Davies's rude questions about the building's other tenants further illustrates his prejudiced attitude toward foreigners and non-white people, groups that he scapegoats in order to feel superior.*

Davies asks Aston if he has a spare pair of **shoes** before segueing into a rant about the "bastards" at the monastery in Luton, at Shepherd's Bush. Davies explains that he had a friend at Shepherd's Bush who was in charge of the toilets at the monastery, who'd give Davies soap whenever he came to wash there and who told him he could get shoes there. Aston appears with a pair of brown shoes for Davies and, beginning to polish the shoes, asks Davies to continue his story. Davies begins to explain what the "bastard monk" did to him but becomes distracted and asks Aston how many "Blacks" are in the building. Aston doesn't answer and hands Davies the shoes. Davies begins to resume his story but stops again, wondering aloud if the shoes will be too snug for his feet.

*Davies's rant about the monastery continues to characterize him as someone who blames other people for his problems, because doing so gives him a sense of power and superiority despite having no social capital as a homeless person. This mindset allows him to view himself as being wronged, and his shortcomings and failures as a side effect of this rather than the outcome of his own personal failings. Davies's tendency to become distracted and change the subject in the middle of telling a story is characteristic of the dialogue in the play: it's disjointed, unproductive, wryly comical. These qualities speak to a larger problem of language's shortcomings and people's helplessness to transcend their alienation from others. Rather than be grateful to Aston for providing him with the shoes he desperately needs, Davies criticizes the shoes, claiming that they don't fit. He seems to want to convince the world that he has discerning taste in clothing, but rejecting the shoes means that he will have to continue wearing his impractical sandals. In this sense, his desire to* appear *well-off takes priority over the actual steps he could take to improve his life—an absurd, self-defeating mindset.*

Davies continues his story, recalling how the monk told him to "piss off" when he asked about the **shoes**. Davies then asked for a meal, and the monk directed him to the kitchen, instructing him to leave as soon as he finished eating. Davies complained about the meal's small portion size, among other things, and threatened to report the people at the monastery to mother superior, though he didn't follow through with his threat, having left after "an Irish hooligan" affronted him. After this, he continued traveling, arriving at another town where he was able to receive shoes, though they fell apart shortly after he received them.

*Davies's recollection about telling the monk to "piss off" and about the monastery's subpar meals is darkly humorous and further characterizes Davies as a perpetually ungrateful, self-defeating, self-aggrandizing character. His disparaging comments about the "Irish hooligan" is more evidence of his prejudiced attitude toward outsiders, as well as a look into attitudes that would have been prevalent when the play is set (the late 1950s in England). The Irish constituted the largest immigrant group during the massive wave of immigrant that happened after World War II, and there was a lot of anti-Irish sentiment in England during this time.*

Aston hands Davies the newly polished **shoes**. Davies takes the shoes and commends their sturdiness before complaining about being offered a pair of suede shoes the other day, which he refused on the grounds that suede isn't as good as leather. Aston moves to his bed as Davies tries on the shoes and observes that they are too small and pointed for his feet, complaining that "they'd cripple [him] in a week" before returning the shoes to Aston.

*Davies fixates on the inadequacy of the various pairs of shoes he is offered because (consciously or unconsciously) he believes these external objects—not his own willingness to work or engage with the world—are what determine his successes in life. His attitude makes the idea that people can control the course of their lives seem meaningless. It's almost as though life has dealt Davies such an unfortunate hand that he externalizes his problems onto objects (or other people) in an effort to gain some semblance of control over his otherwise uncontrollable life. But given that the play portrays him as such an unlikeable character, it stands to reason that readers aren't necessarily supposed to sympathize with his views. Instead, they're meant to see the absurdity of his self-defeating mindset—but also the absurdity of modern society's tendency to value people based on their class status. These conditions make social acceptance seem impossible for homeless people like Davies and, in turn, reinforce the sort of pessimistic attitude he has.*

Aston asks Davies where he plans to go after this. Davies gives no definite answer, mumbling something about needing the weather to improve. Aston offers to let Davies stay at his place until he can get back on his feet. Davies asks where he'll sleep, and Aston replies that Davies can sleep in this room. He gestures behind some junk in the room, explaining that there is a bed for Davies there. Davies accepts Aston's offer.

*Just as Davies thinks that a good pair of shoes will be what decide his life's successes and failures, he uses the weather to determine his future plans. Again, he allows outside circumstances to dictate his life and to distract from the fact that he is responsible for his own choices. Moreover, Davies's vague response to Aston's inquiry about his plans implies that he doesn't actually* have *plans, which further characterizes him as aimless and pessimistic about his ability to change the course of his life. Given Davies's ungrateful, entitled attitude, it's possible that he'll try to take advantage of Aston's hospitality for as long as he can.*

As Aston picks up a wooden plank, Davies asks if the stove in the room works. Aston reveals that the stove is broken. Davies then asks about the wooden plank Aston is holding, and Aston explains that he has plans to build a shed out back, as he likes to work with his hands.

*The apartment's state of disrepair could have economic implications—perhaps Aston can't afford to fix or discard broken objects. But his unwillingness to let go of things that no longer serve a purpose might also symbolically represent Aston's unwillingness or inability to let go of the past. His admission about the shed and being handy provides some insight about his habit of tinkering with various tools, as it seems like building things (or at least the* idea *of building things) gives Aston a sense of purpose. Like Davies's vague intentions, though, Aston's plans for the shed remain (as of yet) just that: plans. In addition, there's no evidence that Aston is actually handy, since it doesn't seem like he's built anything. In this way, the way the society of the play values productivity seems to have made both Aston and Davies cling to the* idea *of being useful people rather than actually taking steps to* be *useful. For both men, who they perceive themselves to be doesn't match up with who they are in reality.*

Davies retrieves **the Buddha statue** and asks Aston about it. Aston takes the statue from Davies and explains that he picked it up in a shop because it "looked quite nice," but doesn't say much more, other than that he likes to hold it and appreciates that it's well-made. Aston gives the statue to Davies, who puts it back on the stove. Davies gestures toward the bed he's supposed to sleep on, which is covered in various objects, including a ladder and a sink. The two men remove the objects from the bed. Aston explains that there's a washroom down the hall with a sink in it and that they can put some of this stuff there. Together, Aston and Davies move around the drawer, a tennis racket, umbrella, coal bucket, empty cigarette box, lawn mower, and shopping trolley.

*Aston's remarks about the Buddha statue are oddly vague and superficial—he doesn't mention anything about the statue having personal or spiritual value for him, only that he thinks it "look[s] quite nice." Such observations might extend to any number of other objects in Aston's space, as well, they all seem random, unrelated to one another, and largely useless—as though he hoards things for the sake of hoarding them. And, notably, Aston doesn't seem to live with anyone or even to be able to communicate effectively, which suggests that he grows attached to these objects in lieu of growing attached to other people. Post-WWII Britain (where the story is set) saw a major boom in consumerism after the war, and the play seems to be implying that the sort of blind consumption Aston engages in is a way of distracting from emotional or spiritual emptiness. In other words, like Davies, Aston seems to fixate on external objects instead of directing his attention toward deeper, internal concerns.*

Davies interrupts the moving process to ask Aston if they share the washroom with "them Blacks." Aston changes the subject and asks Davies if he's seen a blue case anywhere. Davies spots it on the carpet. Aston removes a sheet and pillow from the case and places them on Davies's bed. He asks Davies about his financial situation, and Davies admits that he doesn't have much money, as he wasn't paid for his last week's work. So, Aston offers Davies some money.

*Aston continues to be overly generous to Davies, a completely stranger, and Davies, in turn, continues to be wholly ungrateful to Aston. This begins to pessimistically suggest that even people like Davies, who have nothing to their name and little hope of improving their lives, can be fundamentally self-interested and unreceptive to other people's efforts to connect with or help them.*

Davies talks about wanting the weather to improve so he can go to Sidcup. Aston moves to the bed and begins to fiddle with a screwdriver and plug before asking Davies why he wants to go to Sidcup. Davies explains that he left his identification papers there, with a man he knows. He then reveals that he's been going by a false name, Bernard Jenkins, and that his papers in Sidcup list his real name, which is Mac Davies. Bernard Jenkins, however, is the name that's listed on the stamped unemployment card Davies carries with him now, and he worries that he'll go to jail if officials find out he's been using a fake name.

*Sidcup is an area in southeast of London, whereas (according to the stage notes) Aston's building is in west London. Davies's admission about using a false name lends another element of nefariousness to his character: besides being rude and ungrateful, he is clearly deceptive, going to great lengths to conceal his true identity. This, combined with Aston's unfaltering generosity, seems like a bad mix, as Davies is clearly taking advantage of his host's good will. The fact that Davies goes by a false name could suggest that he isn't actually English (he could be Welsh or another nationality). If he isn't, his vitriol toward supposed outsiders would be particularly cruel and hypocritical, given that he is something of an outsider himself. His hyper-focus on nationality and race thus far (as well as his possible willingness to lie about his identity) hints that British society was judgmental of outsiders at this time, and that Davies is afraid of being regarded as an outsider.*

Davies asks about the **bucket** hanging above his bed. Aston explains that there's a leak in the ceiling, which prompts Davies to decide to sleep in Aston's bed to avoid the leak. Davies asks if Aston can move the stove that's directly next to Aston's bed, but Aston says it's too heavy. Davies pulls up the covers to go to sleep, Aston continues to fiddle with his plug, and the lights fade to black.

*Davies is being very particular for someone who is completely indebted to others, upending the adage that "beggars can't be choosers." He seems determined to convince Aston that he's used to a higher standard of living, in an effort to conceal his poverty—yet, ironically, this only reinforces his poverty because his pickiness makes him less likely to receive the help he needs. Aston continues to fiddle with the wooden plank, though he doesn't appear to be making any progress. In fact, it's unclear if Aston ever makes progress on any of his projects, particularly in light of the fact that he's resorted to a temporary solution (hanging a bucket to catch the water) rather than solving the root cause of the problem (fixing the leaky roof). Like Davies, who puts off going to Sidcup, Aston also seems to avoid his responsibilities. With the bucket, then, the play is pointing to the absurdity and futility of approaching life in this manner, as avoiding one's problems will inevitably fail, just as the bucket will eventually overflow. Still, the frequency with which Aston tinkers with tools is evidence that he's anxious about not being productive, which implies his desire to be seen as a functioning, worthy member of society. Again, this suggests that while avoiding one's problems and lying to oneself is self-destructive, it's also perhaps a natural mode of being for people who are unable to meet the standards society imposes on them.*

## ACT 1, SCENE 2

It's morning, and the lights are on. Aston gets dressed, makes his bed, and turns around to face Davies, who is still asleep. Aston smiles and coughs, which wakes up Davies. Davies sits up in bed, confused, before he remembers where he is. Aston checks out the toaster, poking at it with a screwdriver. He asks Davies if he was dreaming last night, as he was making lots of groaning noises in the night. Davies appears alarmed and insists that Aston must be mistaken, as he never dreams or talks in his sleep. Instead, he hypothesizes that it was "them Blacks" making noises through the walls that caused him his apparent unrest.

*Aston has moved on to another arbitrary broken object, seemingly without having fixed the plug he was fiddling with yesterday. This seems to be a pattern: he acts productive and insists that he's good with his hands, though he never actually finishes any of the tasks he sets out to do. Meanwhile, Davies is again blaming others for his faults rather than taking responsibility for them, scapegoating "them Blacks" (a derogatory way of referring to Black people). In a sense, then, both men are lying to themselves in order to make themselves feel more in control of their lives, but this doesn't actually solve the problems they're worried about.*

Aston puts on his jacket to go out to meet a man about a jigsaw he wants to buy. Davies offers to go with Aston, in case Aston doesn't want to leave Davies alone in the room, but Aston doesn't care and leaves Davies a set of keys. Aston then changes the subject, telling Davies about how he was sitting in a café the other day, making small talk with a woman when, suddenly, the woman placed her hand over Aston's and asked if he'd like her to see his body, which Aston found odd. Davies says that women ask him things like this all the time.

*Davies's offer to go with Aston suggests that he assumes Aston is worried Davies will steal from him if left alone in the room. It's almost a passive aggressive jab at Aston, implicitly accusing him of being judgmental of Davies—even though Davies, with his rudeness and deception, has given Aston reason to be wary. It's also hypocritical of Davies to be judgmental of Aston's weariness of him, given Davies's own nonstop judgment of others. So, again, Davies is projecting his own shortcomings onto others instead of accepting responsibility for them. Meanwhile, Aston's anecdote about the woman at the café suggests that he sees human intimacy as jarring, unnatural, and off-putting. Davies swift eagerness to relate to Aston's story seems like a lie, given the play's characterization of him as disheveled, rude, and violent. In fact, Davies has repeatedly acted high and mighty in order to convince Aston that he's powerful and high-status, when really he is neither. Davies's lies also speak to the potential for language to be vapid and meaningless.*

Changing the subject, Aston asks Davies if he's Welsh. Davies refuses to answer, muttering something about having "been around." He becomes combative when Aston asks him where he was born and refuses to answer this as well. Aston shows Davies an electric heater he can use while he's gone. Davies says he won't use the heater but asks about the stove, which, Aston reminds him, is disconnected. Davies complains about the stove being too close to his bed, insisting that he's worried about accidentally bumping against the gas tabs. Aston assures Davies that there's nothing to worry about. Davies asks Aston for some money for tea, prompting Aston to remind Davies that he gave him money last night, a detail Davies claims to have forgotten.

*Davies's refusal to come clean about his past again suggests that he might not be the born-and-bred Englishman he's purported to be, which would make his hatred toward foreigners absurd in its hypocrisy. The stove that isn't hooked up to a gas line adds another layer of absurdity to the play, as it creates the sense that nothing in the men's lives—from their actions to their words to the very objects that surround them—serves any purpose. Both Davies and Aston seem to fixate on objects like the stove rather than on other people—at this point in the play, they've both talked much more about the things that are in the room than about each other, for example. This speaks to the difficulty of communicating, forming relationships, or finding meaning in modern society. Meanwhile, it seems likely that Davies didn't really "forget" that Aston gave him money last night but thought that he'd try to trick Aston into giving him more. In this way, he seems to view their interactions not as a potential inroad to friendship, but as transactional, which again suggests that even the most downtrodden people can still be greedy and self-interested.*

Davies mentions possibly wanting to go to a café in Wembley later in the day to inquire about a job, explaining that the café owners are interested in getting rid of their foreign workers in favor of hiring Englishmen. He wishes there were a way for him to "get down there," insinuating that he won't actually be able to make the trip. Aston barely acknowledges Davies's speech before leaving the room.

*Davies's remark about wanting to inquire about a job to an employer who wishes to hire Englishmen implies that Davies considers himself an Englishmen. His nationality is up for debate, however, given his wishy-washy response to Aston's earlier question about him being Welsh. It's possible that Davies is lying to others—and maybe even himself—about his origins in an effort to elevate his social status in a culture that is prejudiced against immigrants. Aston's disregard of Davies's speech suggests that he's growing tired of the man's hypothetical musings: why should Aston entertain plans that likely won't come to fruition? It also underscores their struggles to communicate, as neither of them are able (or willing) to speak their true feelings or intentions.*

Once he ensures that Aston is actually gone, Davies locks the door and begins to rummage through Aston's things, investigating the **shoes** Aston brought for him, a vase full of screws, and a paint bucket and brush. Davies continues to look about the room, picking up the **Buddha** and placing it in a drawer and remarking on the room's cluttered state. Suddenly, he hears a key turn in the lock and the door opens. In his surprise, Davies lurches forward and stubs his toe, yelping in pain.

*Davies seems more interested in the shoes now that Aston isn't there. So, he might have been putting on a show earlier when he claimed the shoes weren't good enough for him, perhaps wanting Aston to think his standards are higher and more refined than they really are.*

Mick enters the room, silently closing the door behind him. Davies doesn't notice Mick and continues to root around in Aston's things. Suddenly, Mick enters into Davies's line of sight and grabs his arm. Davies screams and a struggle ensues, with Mick forcing Davies to the floor. Mick gestures for Davies to be quiet and, once Davies stops yelling, lets him go. Mick turns and looks around the room. He walks toward Davies's bed, uncovers it, and picks up Davies's clothing. Next, Mick looks at **the Buddha statue**. Davies remains on the floor. Finally, Mick sits down in the chair, faces Davies, and, after a long pause, asks Davies what his "game" is. The light fades to black, and the curtain falls.

*Mick immediately resorts to violence and physicality to confront Davies. Although Mick does seem to be under the impression that Davies is an intruder, his actions illustrate the broader tendency of the play's characters to use physical actions before words (for example, Aston fiddling with his tools in lieu of conversing with Davies). This is further emphasized when Mick takes Davies's clothes before he asks Davies what his "game" is—it's as though Mick would rather play a manipulative, antagonistic game than use language to communicate with Davies. Aston seems to admire and relate to the Buddha statue, which imbues it with a certain level of significance, even if Aston can't articulate this very well. Given his affinity for the Buddha, the statue could be read as a stand-in for Aston himself in this scene. So, when Mick examines the Buddha statue, it might symbolize Mick's attempt connect with Aston. Mick has a key to the room, which implies that he knows Aston in some way—though it's unclear whether they are family, roommates, or whether Mick is Aston's landlord.*

## ACT 2, SCENE 1

Only seconds later, Mick remains seated while Davies crouches on the floor. The men stare at each other in silence. Mick orders Davies to tell him his name. Davies complies, though he offers Mick his false name, Jenkins. Mick repeats the name, slowly, before asking Davies if he slept there last night. He then asks Davies to repeat his name, though he appears not to understand or hear Davies. Mick pauses as water drips into the hanging **bucket**. He tells Davies that Davies reminds him of his uncle's brother, who is built similarly to Davies, and who was also transient, athletic, and a bit of a ladies' man.

*Mick's repeated and convoluted inquiries illustrate the breakdown of language's ability to convey meaning: no matter how many times Davies responds to Mick, Mick refuses to listen or comprehend what Davies has to say. Further, Mick's unwillingness (or inability) to comprehend Davies renders his own language empty and meaningless: if Mick doesn't care about what Davies has to say, his questioning of Davies is effectively useless. It seems as though the man Mick refers to as his "uncle's brother" might be his father. If so, this is a rather indirect, strange way to refer to him, which suggests that he has a distant, strained relationship with the man. And, in turn, this could explain why Mick seems so disconnected from and hostile to other people in the present (such as when he fled the room in Act One, Scene One to avoid Aston and Davies). The ever-present sound of water dripping into the hanging bucket positions all the play's characters as trapped in a cycle of inaction and malaise, as this haphazard solution underscores the fact that the characters aren't doing anything meaningful to solve their problems. It also draws attention to the moments of silence in Mick and Davies's conversation here, as well as many other conversations in the play, which reinforces the difficulty of communicating openly and authentically.*

Mick remembers how his uncle's brother also carried around a fiddle on his back. He speculates the man might have had "a bit of Red Indian in him." Mick confesses that he's often wondered whether "it might be the other way round," with his uncle actually being his uncle's brother and vice versa. He recalls that he never called the man his uncle, and that both he and his mother called hm Sid. Mick ends his recollection and asks if Davies slept well.

*Mick's comments here further suggest a distance between him and his father—and between him and his family, more broadly. It also paints human relationships as frail, tenuous, and meaningless, since he doesn't even seem sure of who his father and his uncle are in relation to him. Mick's abrupt change of subject is jarring and follows a pattern the reader has seen in the play thus far, of characters dropping subjects with little warning and picking up new topics without having satisfactorily finished the prior conversation. One effect of this is that there is very little character development, with each man bringing a train of thought to an abrupt halt before it can develop into something that would say something authentic or new about him or his relationships with others. Mick's unpredictability also suggests that he is actively trying to confuse and disarm Davies in order to beat Davies at his own game of deception and manipulation.*

Davies refuses to answer Mick's question, pointing out that he doesn't even know who Mick is. Mick ignores this, asking which bed Davies slept in. When Davies gestures toward Aston's bed, Mick calls Davies "choosy" and asks how he likes "his" room, which confuses Davies. Mick changes the subject, explaining how Davies also reminds him of another man he once knew. Mick goes on a long and strangely detailed tangent about the man's upbringing in Putney (a detail Mick is fine with, as he knows many people born in Putney), about how the man's mother lived at "the Angel," and about how Mick used to park his bike in the woman's garden while he went to work. Mick ends his story and inquires, again, if Davies slept well.

*Mick continues to repeat himself, asking again about Davies's sleeping arrangements for the previous night. His words become even more empty, meaningless, and absurd, and their unpredictability is further evidence that Mick is trying to disarm and disorient Davies.*

Davies tells Mick that he slept well, though Mick ignores Davies's answer and repeats the question. Mick continues to repeat himself, and Davies grows more irritated, which leads to Mick, again, calling Davies "choosy." Davies groans in frustration. Mick asks Davies if he's a foreigner, which Davies denies. Next, Mick approaches Davies's bed, claiming that it's his, and warns Davies not to "catch a draught." When Mick turns his back, Davies grabs his own trousers, but Mick notices and takes them from him, refusing to give them back even after Davies lunges at him. Mick asks Davies if he intends to stay in the room. Davies demands that Mick return his trousers and tells Mick that he plans to go to Sidcup.

*Davies and Mick have been speaking to each other for quite a while now, yet they've failed to communicate anything of value between the two of them: they don't know each other's names, and they don't know what the other is doing in Aston's room. All they've managed to communicate are empty questions followed by shallow responses that either change the subject or prohibit the transmission of meaningful information in some other absurd way. This points to the potential meaninglessness of language, as the men's actions toward one another are much more indicative of their true thoughts and feelings than their words are. Mick's behavior is manipulative here, because as he criticizes Davies for being "choosy," he's giving Davies another thing to make a fuss about. Lastly, Davies's mention of going to Sidcup seems to be an attempt to show Mick that he's not as "pitiful as Mick has made him out to be—that he actually has plans and ambitions. Still, though, Davies has now mentioned Sidcup a number of times without making any actual plans to go, so the reader (and the other characters) might be skeptical that Davies will actually make this trip.*

Mick and Davies continue their pseudo-conversation in this circuitous fashion. Mick tauntingly flicks the trousers at Davies's face before launching into another story about a man of whom Davies reminds him. Davies interjects, telling Mick he was brought to the room by the man who lives there (Aston). Mick accuses Davies of lying, claiming that the house, room, and beds are all his: in fact, one bed used to be his mother's. Davies becomes flustered. Mick berates Davies, calling him "an old rogue" and a "scoundrel."

*After Davies admits that Aston brought him to the room, Mick doesn't explain his relationship to Aston, seemingly to confuse and antagonize Davies further. Because Mick doesn't clarify this relationship to Davies, it makes his comments about one of the beds being his mother's all the more confusing. Calling Davies "an old rogue" and a "scoundrel" implies that Mick is more overtly suspicious of Davies than Aston seems to be, and perhaps that he's trying to protect Aston from Davies. It seems as though Mick is not fooled Davies's grandiose words and is less willing to give Davies the benefit of the doubt.*

Davies tries to protest, but Mick accuses Davies of "stinking the place out." He calls Davies "an old robber" and threatens to call the police on him. Mick claims that Davies has no right to be in his flat, and that he could charge rent for the room—for good money—at any time he wants. Mick continues, going into a long, detailed spiel about the steps Davies can take if he wants to lease or buy the property in the long term.

*It would be simple for Davies to explain to Mick how Aston invited him back to his room after last night's brawl at the café, yet he fails to do so, which perpetuates the two characters' misunderstandings about each other. Their inability to connect and understand each other is another instance in which language fails, communication doesn't occur, and chaos and absurdity are allowed to exist unchecked. Mick's accusation that Davies is "stinking the place out" is significant because it confirms Davies's worst fear, which is that his low class status and position as an outsider are obvious to others.*

Suddenly, the door opens, and Aston walks into the room. Mick drops Davies's trousers and sits in the chair. Davies puts on his trousers. Aston puts a bag he was carrying on the floor, removes his coat, sits down, and lights a cigarette. The room is silent, minus the sound of water dripping into the hanging **bucket**. Mick comments on the leak. Aston says he plans to fix it by filling the cracks with tar. Davies interrupts their back and forth to ask what they'll do when the bucket is full. Aston responds, simply, that they'll "empty it."

*This is the first moment that the play's three characters have been in the same room at the same time, yet they fail to engage with one another verbally, choosing instead to engage with objects in the room. When the characters do speak, they keep the subject matter shallow and trivial, focusing their attention on the bucket hanging from the ceiling. The sound of water dripping into the bucket emphasizes the characters' silence and their absence of effective communication. The bucket also gives the reader more insight into Aston's inability to address the problems that plague his home, and, by extension, his life. Aston explains that he'll empty the bucket after it's full—rather than fix the ceiling leak that's at the heart of the problem—which speaks to his stagnancy in life. He'd rather continue to use the same fallible, temporary solutions and put forth the appearance of being productive than take a risk and solve the root cause of the problem.*

Aston gestures toward the bag he was carrying, which is full of Davies's belongings. Davies takes the bag, but Mick rips it from his hands. Davies yells at Mick to give it back, but Mick ignores him, noting that the bag looks "very familiar."

*Ripping the bag from Davies's hands is another instance in which Mick assaults Davies physically rather than trying to reach a verbal understanding with him. This again suggests that people's words can be deceptive and manipulative, and that their actions are usually more straightforward.*

Aston tries to calm the two men, who ignore him. Mick asks Davies where he got the bag, and Davies insists that the bag is his own. Aston tells Mick to give Davies the bag. Confused, Mick asks "what bag?" Davies reaches for his bag, which causes Mick to back away from Davies and accuse him of being too aggressive for someone who's just broken into a private residence. Aston takes the bag from Mick. Davies calls Mick a "thieving bastard." The three men struggle with the bag, passing it among themselves. Finally, Aston hands the bag to Mick, who hands it to Davies. Mick and Davies exchange a glance. Aston asks Davies how he faired in his job search at Wembley that day, and Davies explains that he never got around to going. Mick leaves the room.

*The scene with the bag is the most direct interaction that Mick, Davies, and Aston have had with one another, and its ridiculousness and notable absence of language underscores their inability to understand and communicate with one another. They fumble physically instead of using language; when the characters do speak, they use language that is either insulting or empty and manipulative, such as when Mick feigns ignorance and asks, "what bag?" Aston's question about Davies failed job search is further that Davies's claims that he will leave the room and get a job are empty and meaningless, and that he doesn't actually intend to follow through with this.*

Aston explains to Davies that Mick is his brother. Davies calls Mick "a real joker," which Aston seems hesitant to agree to, though he allows that Mick does have "a sense of humor," and "his own way of doing things." Aston gets up, retrieves the **Buddha** from the drawer, and places it on the top shelf of the stove. He explains that he's supposed to be decorating this floor of the building for Mick, who is a builder.

*The reveal that Mick is Aston's brother is surprising, since thus far they've hardly spoken and acted as if they hardly know each other. Aston seems hesitant to talk badly of Mick, perhaps because he feels a sense of loyalty toward his brother despite their distant relationship. He eventually gives in, though, admitting that Mick has "a sense of humor" and "his own way of doing things." It seems as though Aston says these things just to appease Davies, which shows how much of Aston's personality is based on being who he believes others want him to be. Meanwhile, it's odd that Mick has given Aston the task of fixing up the apartment, given that Mick is the one who is actually a builder. It seems possible that Mick assigned Aston this task just to give him something to do, even though Mick knows that he could probably do a better job. This again implies that the brothers care for each other, albeit it in an unspoken way. The Buddha statue symbolizes Aston's social alienation and frustrations with being stuck in the past. When Aston places it on the stove, it's his way of metaphorically or unconsciously recognizing his frustrations at letting Mick down and failing to decorate the building. That Aston makes a point to retrieve the statue from the drawer and place it in clear view implies that these anxieties are always at the forefront of his mind.*

Davies asks if Mick lives here, but Aston ignores the question. He moves to the window, gazes outside, and talks about wanting to decorate the flat after he builds the shed out back. Seeming to be talking more to himself than to Davies, Aston makes plans to have a woodshop in the shed. He finishes daydreaming and returns to the bed.

*This isn't the first time Aston has mentioned wanting to build the shed, yet he's made no efforts to kickstart this project, nor has he started any of the repairs on the apartment building. Just as Davies fails to follow through with his plans to get his papers in Sidcup, then, Aston's plans for the future also seem to be hollow, hypothetical, and beyond his ability to complete. There's an asymmetry between Aston's words and his ability to translate these words into actions, which again suggests that language is limited in its ability to convey the truth. Still, it's important for Aston to talk about his plans to complete the shed, because the existence of these plans makes him appear as though he is a productive, capable, and worthy member of society.*

Davies tells Aston that he now realizes the bag isn't actually his and accuses the café of keeping his bag and swapping it with someone else's. Aston confesses that someone took Davies's bag and that he picked up this one from a different place. Davies opens the bag to look for a pair of **shoes**. He removes a red checkered shirt and complains that it won't be good for the winter and that he'd rather have a nicer quality striped shirt. Next, he pulls out a velvet smoking jacket. Davies decides that the jacket feels nice, checks inside its pockets, and asks Aston how he looks. Aston says it looks fine.

*At first it seems as though Davies is commenting on the shirt not being warm enough for the winter, so it's comical and absurd when the reader realizes he's actually complaining about the shirt's stripes—something that's completely irrelevant to the shirt's ability to keep him warm in the winter. Again, there is an absurdity here that Davies—a man who literally doesn't own a single shirt—is complaining about the style of a shirt he's been fortunate enough to receive through Aston's act of charity. In this way, Davies's very aversion to appearing poorly dressed prevents him from accepting a shirt that would greatly improve his life. Davies seems to take a liking to the velvet smoking jacket because it looks well-made, and wearing it (and recognizing its high quality) might trick Aston and the rest of the world into thinking Davies is of a higher social and economic class than he actually is.*

Aston moves toward the bed and tells Davies that he could be the caretaker, if he wanted. Aston removes the plank and screwdriver from the bed before elaborating on what responsibilities the position would entail: taking care of the stairs, landing, and front steps; and polishing the bells, which Aston plans to install at the front door.

*This moment is significant as it's the first mention of the titular caretaker. It's unclear exactly what Aston is doing here: is he pushing his own responsibility for the building onto Davies? Is he just being nice and offering Davies a way to earn a living? So far, Aston seems to be more willing than Mick is to give Davies the benefit of the doubt, but the characters' continual failure to communicate makes Aston's true intentions behind offering Davies the caretaker unclear. The fact that Aston lists responsibilities Davies wouldn't even be able to complete because Aston hasn't taken care of his own tasks—such as installing the bells at the front door—further emphasizes the gap between Aston's aspirations for the future versus what he's actually able to accomplish. And, in listing those aspirations, he makes his failure to achieve them all the more evident.*

Davies seems to be caught off guard and admits that he hasn't ever worked as a caretaker before. Aston and Davies go back and forth, each starting to articulate thoughts and questions that they never quite finish. Davies repeatedly asks Aston if he understands him. Though Aston claims that he does understand Davies, it's unclear if they have really reached an understanding. Aston gives an overview of Davies's caretaker responsibilities, such as tending to the stairs and the bells. He then takes a blue coat that had been hanging above his bed and offers it to Davies to wear if he becomes the caretaker.

*Aston and Davies's verbal exchange is nonsensical, unproductive, and disjointed, which again points to the men's alienation from each other and to the limitations of language to remedy that alienation. That Aston gives Davies the caretaker's coat is an example of how the characters in the play externalize their dreams, identities, and anxieties onto objects. Aston seems to believe that wearing the coat will allow Davies to successfully assume the identity and responsibilities of caretaker, despite the reality that Davies—with his reluctance to work and take on responsibilities—will likely be ill-suited to this position.*

Aston offers to install a bell outside the front door with the label "Caretaker," so that Davies can be reached when he's needed. Davies is skeptical of this, fearing that the sign will make it easy for his enemies, such as "that Scotch bastard," to find him.

*It seems more likely that Davies is hesitant to accept the position of caretaker because he doesn't want to work, but he frames his hesitancy in terms of being paranoid about his enemies, such as "that Scotch bastard" from the café, finding him. Once more, Davies represses his actual personal failures and shortcomings (in this case, an unwillingness to work) and places blame on others to excuse these personal failures. In this way, his absurd unwillingness to admit to his failures prohibits him from improving his situation.*

Davies says that he only has "four stamps" on his unemployment card, "that's all," and that if they find him there, he'll be done for. Of course, Davies insists, he has many other cards lying around, but these people don't know that—and if he told them that, then he'd be found out, just the same. Davies tells Aston that the name he's using now, Davies, isn't actually his real name either. The lights go black.

*Davies's admissions make him even harder to trust: he has an entire arsenal of false names, it seems, and he even admits that the name he's purported to be his real name (Davies) is itself an assumed name. Of course, given Davies's deceitfulness, it's difficult to know whether he's lying when he says Davies isn't his real name. It could be that Davies is his name, but he's lying to distance himself from his possibly non-English background (which English people at this time might have considered inferior). Either way, Davies's true identity contradicts that which is spelled out on his false identification cards, which points to the meaningless of language, or its limitations in telling the truth.*

## ACT 2, SCENE 2

Davies inserts a key into the door and enters the room. He closes the door behind him, muttering to himself as he turns the apparently broken light switch on and off, again and again, without any success. He moves awkwardly in the dark as he fumbles in his pocket for a match. He lights a match, but it goes out. Davies drops the matchbox on the floor, and the box is kicked out of his reach. Davies calls out to whomever is in the room, warning them that he has a knife. Suddenly, Davies hears the electrolux hum nearby, and he jumps backward, screaming in fear. The electrolux stops, and a figure leaps onto Aston's bed.

*Electrolux is an appliance manufacturer; here, it's used as shorthand to refer to a vacuum cleaner. It seems as though someone (likely Mick) is trying to frighten Davies: they've disconnected the room's lights in an effort to shock the unsuspecting Davies with the jarring and unexpected roar of the vacuum cleaner. The swiftness with which Davies resorts to threats of violence shows how rarely he uses effective communication to express himself, often turning straight to violence or threats of physical retaliation.*

The figure unplugs the electrolux and screws in a lightbulb. The lights turn on as Davies jumps back against the wall, clutching his knife. He sees Mick standing on Aston's bed. Mick insists that he was only doing some cleaning and asks Davies how the place looks. He explains that he and Aston take turns cleaning the room, though Mick doesn't actually live there.

*It's clear that Mick was trying to frighten Davies with the electrolux, so his insistence that he was only cleaning is meant to make Davies feel ashamed and humiliated about his fear. This is yet another example of a character lying in order to make themselves feel in control—yet scaring and embarrassing Davies reads like a cruel, childish prank, and so Mick's attempt at a power play actually makes him seem* less *powerful. Mick's electrolux stunt also shows that he is similar to Davies: both men shun effective communication, choosing instead to antagonize each other with acts of cruelty or threats of violence. Their violence is especially striking when compared to the docile, passive Aston—though Aston, too, struggles to communicate effectively with others, speaking slowly and in a disjointed fashion. Mick appears to be spending a lot of time around the building despite not living there, which might imply that he is skeptical of Davies and wanting to keep an eye on him. Mick and Aston don't seem to be all that close, then, Mick still feels obligated to look out for Aston—particularly after the arrival of Davies, who is an unknown, unkempt outsider.*

Still flustered, Davies cautions Mick not to come near him. Mick apologizes for scaring Davies but insists that he had Davies's comfort in mind, too, when he decided to clean the room. He also says he was thinking of lowering Davies's rent until Davies is back on his feet again, though if Davies continues to be defensive and obstinate, he'll take back the offer.

*Mick continues to antagonize Davies, pretending that he was vacuuming for Davies's benefit, when in fact he was really using the machine to frighten and intimidate Davies. Davies's fear of the vacuum highlights the age difference between him and Mick: though Mick is in his thirties, Davies is an older man who is likely less accustomed to technology, so it makes sense that the vacuum cleaner would frighten him. The way Mick quickly changes the subject to a rambling diatribe about Davies's supposed rent demonstrates the ineffectiveness of language: though Mick and Davies might start to converse, initiating what could be a path toward understanding, Mick puts an immediate stop to this when he refuses to follow through with this initial topic of conversation. In this way, language becomes yet another tool a character uses to feel powerful rather than a means of genuine connection.*

Davies tells Mick that he minds his own business—though not if someone messes with him first—and cautions Mick not to push his buttons again. Mick sits down in a pile of some of the room's junk and admits that he's "impressed" by what Davies said about not being messed with. Davies asks Mick if Mick "knows what [Davies is] talking about," and Mick confirms that the two men "understand one another."

*Mick appears to play along with Davies's act, commending Davies for holding his ground. But given Mick's unpredictability and skepticism toward Davies, it's likely that his compliments are a further attempt to mess with Davies. In this way, Mick's actions, not his language, are indicative of how he really feels.*

Davies wonders aloud why Mick has been messing with him, since he hasn't done anything to hurt Mick. Mick responds that the two of them just "got off on the wrong foot." Davies agrees and joins Mick in sitting in the pile of junk. Mick offers Davies a sandwich. Davies is skeptical of the sandwich and brandishes his knife at Mick, but Mick, laying out the sandwich on a small case on the floor, insists that he only wants to help his brother's friend.

*Mick responds to Davies's sincere question with the glib, cliched response that the two of them "got off on the wrong foot." Mick's use of this idiom makes him seem insincere and brings Davies's attempt at authentic, productive communication to an instant halt. Further diminishing the utility of language is Mick's decision to offer Davies a sandwich as a peace offering rather than apologizing with his words. Giving Davies the sandwich allows Mick to go through the motions of an apology without actually apologizing, which leaves it unclear whether he actually wants to make peace with Davies or whether the sandwich is yet another means of toying with him.*

Davies hesitates, explaining that he wouldn't exactly call himself Aston's friend, which results in Mick accusing Davies of finding Aston "unfriendly." Davies clarifies that what he meant was that he and Aston aren't all that close. He then puts his knife back in his pocket and takes half of the sandwich. Again, Mick insinuates that Davies has just called Aston unfriendly, and tries to clarify, again, insisting that he just "can't exactly…make [Aston] out." Mick doesn't respond to this.

*Mick further demonstrates his volatile personality with his sudden, extreme response to Davies's casual remark about not being close with Aston. This again hints that Mick feels an ingrained sense of loyalty toward his brother despite their distant relationship. This scene also illustrates the counterproductive effects of Davies and Mick's language: when Davies attempts to talk to Mick, Mick becomes irate. When Davies conveys his meanings physically, however (such as when he puts his knife back in his pocket and accepting the sandwich), Mick seems to settle down and become more agreeable. This again suggests that language doesn't always convey the truth, and that actions tend to be more straightforward in their meaning.*

As the men eat their sandwiches, Mick asks Davies for advice, calling Davies "a man of the world." Mick admits that he's anxious about Aston, who "doesn't like to work." Davies says he's met people like Aston before. Mick continues, explaining how he wants to ensure that his older brother makes something of himself, yet Aston refuses to commit to any job, even the "little job" he's supposed to be doing for Mick in the flat. Davies says it's "funny" that Aston doesn't like to work, which causes Mick to become defensive of his brother, accusing Davies of being "hypercritical."

*Mick seems to be buttering up Davies when he calls him "a man of the world," flattering Davies to make him more agreeable. Mick's strategy seems to work, as Davies immediately agrees with Mick's complaint about Aston's poor work ethic. Davies's remark is deceptive and ironic, of course, given Davies's own lack of work ethic. This scene is significant, as it gives the reader some context about Mick and Aston's distant relationship. Mick is worried about the fact that Aston can't or won't be productive, and given that productivity seems to be how people's worth is determined in the society of the play, it seems that Mick is afraid of his brother being devalued and cast aside. Indeed, Mick's anger at Davies's "hypercritical" remark about Aston being "funny" shows that despite the brothers' strained relationship, Mick does care about Aston and feels some kind of familial obligation to protect him against outsiders like Davies.*

Mick walks back and forth before asking Davies if he'd like to stay in the flat and be the caretaker, explaining that he'd like a "capable" man like Davies to keep track of the place. He asks Davies if he's "been in the services." Davies pauses before answering that, yes, he's "spent half [his] life" in the service. Mick elaborates, asking if Davies served "in the colonies," which Davies confirms, going so far as to claim that he "was one of the first over there." Mick is now convinced that Davies is exactly the kind of caretaker he's looking for.

*Mick and Aston have both asked Davies to be the building's caretaker. It seems as though Davies has managed to deceive both brothers into believing he is more capable and willing to work than he really is, though the characters' lack of communication and connection with one another makes it impossible to determine whether they're being sincere. For all the reader knows, Mick's invitation for Davies to be the caretaker could be another attempt to mess with Davies, or else a means of delegating the responsibility of looking after Aston and the building to someone else. Davies's agreeable, affirmative responses to Mick's questions show how he constructs his identity at the suggestions of others. He's far from "capable," and it's highly unlikely he has a past military career, but he insists that he does because he wants Mick's respect and to be treated as an insider. This suggests that rather than being something ingrained or fixed, a person's sense of self can be formed by outside influences and other people's opinions.*

Davies agrees to do "a bit of caretaking." Mick insists that Davies provide references. Davies claims that he has many references, though he'll have to go to Sidcup to retrieve them and his papers. He explains that he would have gone down to Sidcup today, were it not for the bad weather. He then asks Mick if Mick will get him "a good pair of **shoes**," without which it won't be possible for him to go to Sidcup—or anywhere else, for that matter. As Davies eats his last bite of sandwich, Mick nonverbally agrees to Davies's request for new shoes, and the stage fades to black.

*Davies accepts Mick's offer, though he restates the two hurdles that stand in the way of his going to Sidcup to retrieve his documents: his lack of shoes and the unsuitable weather. It's more likely that Davies lacks the references Mick demands of him or doesn't want to retrieve his identification papers in Sidcup because he doesn't want Mick to know his true identity. (Perhaps there is something compromising about his identity, such as his birthplace or nationality, which would turn him into an outsider in Mick's eyes.) In order to avoid dealing with the issues that retrieving his documents might create, Davies makes up excuses to put off the journey to Sidcup. It's becoming increasingly clear that Davies's journey to Sidcup will likely never happen not because of external circumstances, but because of Davies's own aimlessness and self-defeat.*

## ACT 2, SCENE 3

It's morning. Aston puts on his trousers. Looking rather displeased, he moves to the window to fan out the air before waking up Davies to remind him to go to Sidcup that day. Aston begins to say something about Davies making noise in the night again, but Davies interrupts to comment on the rain, asking Aston to shut the window to stop the draught and rain from coming inside. Aston, who is currently sandpapering a small plank, argues that they need the fresh air, but Davies disagrees. The men argue back and forth without reaching a clear solution. Aston eventually puts down his plank and sandpaper and exchanges them for a pair of **shoes**, which he begins to polish.

*Aston and Davies are still unable to have a meaningful conversation, with Davies immediately redirecting the subject away from an important matter (his need to go to Sidcup) to something superficial (the weather). Aston, too, is unable to maintain his train of thought when he shifts his attention away from Davies and toward the sandpaper, wooden plank, and shoes. The men's circuitous, repetitive argument reinforces their failure to communicate. Aston's complaints about Davies making noise in his sleep could be interpreted as his attempt to tell Davies that he's a rude, obtrusive guest without explicitly saying so, which further highlights language's limited ability to communicate people's true thoughts and feelings.*

Aston announces that he's going to go to Goldhawk Road today to ask about a bench he saw there. Davies announces that the rain makes it impossible for him to make his trip to Sidcup today. Aston finally caves and lets Davies close the window. As Davies does so, he looks out the window and asks Aston about the tarp outside. Aston informs him that he's keeping wood he needs to build his shed underneath the tarp.

*Aston continues to put off the work he needs to do: he makes plans to pick up a bench for the building to appear as though he is making progress on the building, though in reality, he continues to make no progress. The same goes for the wood beneath the tarp outside: Aston points to this wood to convince himself and others that he's moving forward with the task of fixing up the building, when, in reality, he's made no progress. Aston seems to want to* appear *productive because this is how he (and society) measures his worth, yet his feigned efforts only make his unproductivity all the more obvious.*

Davies asks Aston about getting a pair of **shoes**, complaining about how it's his bad shoes that keep him from leaving the room. Aston says he'll pick up some shoes for Davies today.

*Once more, Davies cites his lack of adequate walking shoes as the reason he's yet to go to Sidcup to pick up his documents. In reality, he does not want to retrieve the identifying papers, as doing so would be to accept a concrete and perhaps inconvenient truth about his identity (likely that he is a foreigner). Yet if he doesn't retrieve the papers, he won't be able to get a job and will remain a homeless drifter whom people automatically look down on and distrust. The disconnect between Davies's plans and his perpetual inaction creates the sense that the society of the play sets marginalized people up to fail. It doesn't seem like Davies's choices really matter, because he can't win—whether he gets the papers or not, society will reject him either because he's a foreigner or because he's homeless.*

Aston mentions there being a café right down the street and segues into an extended monologue. He remembers going to the café often "before [he] went away" and associates the place with his departure. At the café, Aston talked to many people. At the time, he felt that he understood them, though he now regrets his "mistake" of talking too much to these people. He recalls confessing to them that he experienced "hallucinations," after which the people began to spread rumors about Aston's condition.

*Aston's monologue is important because it's the first moment in the play when a character has divulged something personal in such a detailed, sincere manner. The fact that Aston does so through language contradicts the play's overall portrayal of language as useless, confusing, and unable to forge connections between people. This perhaps suggests that language* can *be meaningful if one actually has something meaningful and honest to say. That Aston considers it a "mistake" to have spoken so candidly with others in the past might explain his reserved, cautious nature in the present. His feeling of not being understood by other people at the café reflects the idea that people in modern society are fundamentally alienated from one another and unable to connect meaningfully. And given the way people spread rumors about Aston rather than trying to help him, the play implies that in a society that values social conformity, people who don't fit in will be ostracized.*

These rumors resulted in Aston being sent to a hospital outside London. At the hospital, the doctors asked him many questions about the thoughts he had. One day, the lead doctor gave Aston a diagnosis and informed Aston that they would have "to do something to [his] brain," or else Aston would have to stay in the hospital forever. The doctor made it sound as though Aston had a choice in the matter, but Aston knew that, because he was a minor, the doctor must first get permission from Aston's mother. Aston later learned that his mother signed the forms needed to validate the procedure.

*Aston's attempts to be close with people backfired when they resulted in his being sent away, which alienated him literally and figuratively. This pessimistically suggests that trying to connect with people—particularly through language—will inevitably lead to misunderstanding and further isolation. His alienation is compounded by his mother's betrayal. Mick's earlier remarks about his and Aston's family hinted that there was some distance between them, and Aston's admission here provides further evidence of the lack of intimacy and understanding in their family. This could explain why Aston and Mick seem so alienated from each other (as well as other people) in the present—it's possible that their troubled relationships with their parents left them unable to trust and connect with others.*

That night, Aston tried unsuccessfully to escape the hospital. The next week, they performed a procedure on Aston, which involved "big pincers, with wires on, the wires attached to a little machine." The night the doctors came for him, Aston fought back against the men, though they eventually overpowered him. Aston's fight forced the lead doctor to perform the procedure while Aston was standing up, rather than lying on the bed, which Aston believes damaged his spine. After the operation, Aston returned home to live with his mother and older brother, and his thoughts "bec[a]me very slow," which made it hard for him to think and understand other people. It also gave him bad headaches. He remembers "[laying] everything out, in order, in [his] room, all the things [he] knew were [his]." He believes he should have died.

*The procedure to which Aston is referring here is electroconvulsive therapy (sometimes referred to colloquially as electroshock treatment) which involves medically inducing a seizure in patients through electric volts that are passed through the brain. The procedure was used to treat various mental illnesses, such as major depressive disorder and schizophrenia. The treatment negatively affected Aston physically and mentally, making it difficult for him to keep track of his thoughts and understand people. His experience serves as a critique of the way modern society casts out and punishes people who are vulnerable or different—because of mental illness, homelessness, immigrant status, or a host of other factors—rather than trying to understand and help them. Aston's botched therapy is, in this sense, a betrayal, and the trauma of this period in his life seems to have made him more reserved and skeptical of opening up to others. His mention of "[laying] everything out, in order, in [his] room, all the things [he] knew were [his]" is reminiscent of the way Aston collects objects in his room in the present day. The fact that he began exhibiting this behavior after the procedure (and after he become cut off from others) implies that Aston learned to substitute human interaction and connection with the collecting of objects.*

Aston feels better now, though he doesn't communicate with people or go to the café any longer. He still has a strong desire to find the doctor who performed the procedure on him, though first, he wants to build the shed out back. The light fades to black, and the curtain falls.

*Aston carries the trauma and resultant physical and mental damage of his botched treatment with him to this day, as the way people misunderstood his mental illness and mistreated has made him closed off and untrusting. That Aston ends his monologue with mention of the shed suggests that he wants desperately to move on from his past—to create new things and complete new tasks. But the fact that Aston continuously mentions the shed without actually beginning work on it suggests that he remains unable to move forward in his life. In a society that values productivity and social conformity above all else, someone like Aston is set up for failure, as his brain damage makes him both unable to work and unable to fit in with other people.*

## ACT 3, SCENE 1

It's two weeks later. Mick lies on his back on the floor, gazing at the ceiling as Davies paces and smokes a pipe. Davies is puzzled about the cracks in the ceiling, as it's rained quite a bit over the last week, yet the rain hasn't dripped into the hanging **bucket**. Davies speculates that Aston must have sealed the ceiling cracks with tar, though Aston hasn't mentioned this to him—nor does he talk much with Davies at all these days. In fact, Aston won't even give Davies a knife to cut bread. Mick points out that Davies has his own knife. Davies acknowledges this but complains that his own knife isn't good enough.

*Davies and Aston don't seem to be on good terms since Aston delivered his emotional speech about his past institutionalization and traumatic failed electroshock procedure. Even when characters try to use language to become closer to one another, they fail and only widen the distance that separates them, which suggests that even sincere attempts at communication are rendered futile by the alienating and absurd modern world. Davies complains about his knife not being good enough to give Mick the impression that he has discerning taste. Mick's decision to respond critically to Davies's complaint about Aston demonstrates his repeated attempts to stick up for his brother, even though they aren't openly affectionate with each other.*

Davies continues, complaining about how close the gas stove is to his bed, even though Aston has assured him that it's not connected. Next, Davies continues about "them Blacks" using the bathroom and making it "dirty," and about how Aston does nothing about it. Davies confides in Mick that, after Aston had his "long chat" with Davies the other week, the two have hardly spoken. Further, Davies speculates that Aston was actually talking to himself during the "long chat," as he didn't look at Davies when he was speaking. Davies complains about living with someone with whom he can't have a real conversation. In contrast, Davies speculates, he and Mick "could get this place going."

*Davies complains about everyone but himself. Since Aston and Mick both offered him the position of caretaker, it seems as though it should be Davies's own responsibility to do something about the supposedly "dirty" bathroom, yet he blames Black people for making it dirty and Aston for failing to do anything about it. Again, he seems to be blaming other people (and, in this case, scapegoating them in a racist way) for his problems in an attempt to feel better about himself—yet this does nothing to actually solve the problem he's complaining about. Rather than respond sympathetically to Aston's emotional speech, Davies uses it as an opportunity to criticize Aston, minimizing the speech's importance by referring to it as a "long chat" and complaining that Aston didn't look at him when he was talking. It's ironic that Davies accuses Aston of not being able to have a real conversation given that Davies himself isn't capable of communicating with others, always changing the subject to complain about his shoes or something someone has done to wrong or upset him. Davies's suggestion that he and Mick "could get this place going" seems to be his attempt to ingratiate himself with Mick.*

Mick agrees that he and Davies could fix up the flat, and he daydreams about how he might decorate it, what type of fixtures he would install, and the objects with which he would fill it. Davies asks who would live in the finished place, and Mick responds that he and Aston would. Davies asks if he could live there too, but Mick argues that there's too much junk in the space for Davies. After a pause, Mick laments Aston's disinterest in Mick's home improvements.

*Given Aston's inability to accomplish the smallest of tasks, it's likely that Mick's elaborate daydreams are the closest he'll get to the flat actually being finished. This claim is supported when Mick laments his brothers failure to complete the home improvement tasks needed to make the place livable. When Mick tells Davies that he and Aston—and not Davies—will live in the finished flat, it suggests that even with Davies's many deceptive attempts to relate to and win over Mick, Mick will always be obligated to his brother first. Once again, then, Davies is made to feel like an outsider.*

Mick suggests that Davies talk some sense into Aston, seeing as they're friends. Davies objects, arguing that they're not actually friends. Unlike Mick, whom Davies considers to be "straightforward," Aston is unknowable. Davies changes the subject and announces that he needs a clock to be able to tell the time while he is in the house. When he mentioned needing a clock to Aston, he complains, Aston did nothing. In fact, all Aston seems to do is wake up Davies to complain about him "making noises" in his sleep. Mick sympathizes with Davies's plight.

*Davies uses Aston's earlier confession against him, applying what he now knows about Aston's botched ECT treatment to put forth the idea that Aston is unknowable. He tries to pit Mick against Aston, positioning Mick as "straightforward" and, therefore, the opposite of the unknowable and enigmatic Aston. But Davies's complaints about Aston are ironic, given that it's really Aston who has much more reason to complain about the disruptive Davies. Again, Davies is shifting the blame onto someone else in order to make himself feel superior.*

Davies continues to complain about Aston, telling Mick that Aston leaves all day—Davies knows not where—comes back late, and says nothing to Davies until he's waking him up "in the middle of the night" to order him to stop making so much noise. Davies asks Mick where he lives, and Mick tells Davies he has "a little place" and invites him over to listen to music. In the distance, a door bangs open. Mick gets up and exits through the room without telling Davies where he's going.

*In light of Aston's earlier confession that he rarely goes out anymore, it's contradictory that he supposedly leaves all day. It's clear that Mick and Davies are deceptive, manipulative characters, and the reader might be inclined to believe that Aston, in contrast, is less dishonest and more sincere. However, the fact that Aston apparently does leave the house all the time—despite making statements to the contrary—opens up the possibility that even Aston isn't as honest or upfront as one might initially believe him to be. Despite the fact that Mick and Davies are seeming to relate to each other over their frustrations with Aston, Mick still leaves the room without saying anything to Davies, which suggests that Mick isn't actually okay with Davies criticizing his brother in this manner.*

Aston enters the room and closes the door behind him. He hands Davies a paper bag containing a pair of **shoes**. Davies tries them on and complains that they don't fit; furthermore, they have no laces. Aston looks around the room and finds a pair of laces, but Davies rejects them because they don't match the shoes. Davies laces them anyway, deciding that these shoes and laces will allow him to at least get to Sidcup tomorrow, at which point he'll "be able to sort himself out."

*Davies's complaints about these shoes are even more absurd than before: whereas Davies rejected the first pair of shoes that Aston offered him because they supposedly didn't fit well, these he rejects because he doesn't like the way they look. Davies seems determined to find something unsuitable about the shoes, because—to his mind—if he doesn't have proper shoes, he doesn't have to go to Sidcup. And if he doesn't have to go to Sidcup, he won't have face his problems and commit to being the person his identifying papers say he is—instead, he can continue to loaf around Aston's room in a state of perpetual immobility and meaninglessness.*

Davies mutters something about having "been offered a good job," though the "man" who hired him wants his papers, which are in Sidcup, and, because of the poor weather, he likely won't be able to get there to retrieve them. Aston silently leaves the room. Davies, not noticing Aston's departure, continues his rant, redirecting his attention back at the ill-fitting, weather-inappropriate **shoes**. Davies turns around and notices Aston's absence. He angrily curses Aston, calling him a "bastard." The scene fades to black.

*Davies is clearly referring to Mick when he talks about having "been offered a good job" by a "man." The fact that he doesn't refer to Mick by name suggests that he doesn't want Aston to know that Mick has also offered him the job—in other words, he doesn't want Mick and Aston to know that they're on the same page about Davies. In Davies's mind, his place in the house is safe so long as he can ensure that Mick and Aston's intentions remain unknown to each other. In this sense, the brother's alienation from each other leaves them open to Davies's manipulation—though there have been several hints throughout the play that Aston and Mick are more loyal to each other than Davies would like to believe. Indeed, Aston leaves the room without warning Davies, which is exactly what Mick did earlier in the scene. That Aston mimics Mick's behavior unites them, albeit rather indirectly. Davies is frustrated because this bond between Mick and Aston leaves him out of the loop and demotes him to the role of outsider—a role he desperately wants to reject.*

## ACT 3, SCENE 2

It's night, and Aston and Davies are in bed. Davies makes noises in his sleep. Aston lights a cigarette, walks over to Davies's bed, and shakes him awake, ordering him to be quiet. Irritated, Davies tells Aston he's "not surprised they took [him] in" and accuses Aston of giving him nightmares. Davies continues to berate Aston. He throws aside his blanket to reveal that he is fully dressed and yells at Aston for opening the window and making it freezing in the room.

*Whereas in his earlier conversation with Mick, Davies only implicitly criticized Aston for his mental illness, this time he addresses the matter explicitly, insulting Aston to his face for something over which Aston has no control. Again, Davies is tearing another person down in an attempt to make himself feel superior—but this, of course, makes Davies less likeable rather than more so.*

Davies continues his rant, mocking Aston for his stay in the mental institution. He claims that Mick can send him back to receive more electroshock therapy and that the hospital made a mistake in releasing Aston in the first place, as he's clearly still crazy. Davies continues to berate Aston, accusing him of "treating [him] like a bloody animal," even though Davies isn't the one who's been institutionalized. Aston moves toward Davies, who takes out his knife.

*Davies tries to pit Aston against Mick by claiming that Mick wants to send Aston away again, even though Mick hasn't made any such remarks. Davies takes advantage of Mick and Aston's distant relationship, believing that if he can drive a wedge between the two of them, he can ingratiate himself with one (or both) of them and, in so doing, become part of an in-group. Davies's remark about Aston "treating [him] like a bloody animal" is projection, given that it's really the other way around: it's Aston who treats Davies with respect, and Davies who denies Aston compassion and understanding. Further, when Davies takes out his knife, he's literally treating Aston like an animal—a creature who is unable to comprehend language and will only respond to brute force.*

Aston tells Davies he should find somewhere else to live. Appalled, Davies argues that he can't leave because he's been offered the job of caretaker. Aston tells Davies he's not a good candidate for the position. Davies tells Aston to get Mick, who'll vouch for him.

*The way people mistreated Aston when he had a mental illness destroyed his mind and his life, isolating him further from an already alienating world. So, although Aston has put up with Davies's rudeness, noisiness, and ingratitude for weeks, when Davies ridicules Aston for his traumatic past and resultant disabilities, Aston decides that Davies has crossed a line. In a final effort to try to use Mick and Aston's estrangement to his advantage, Davies threatens Aston that Mick will take his side if Aston tries to kick Davies out.*

Aston offers Davies some money to get to Sidcup. Davies rejects Aston's money and tells him to "build [his] stinking shed first." Aston moves toward Davies, forcing him to back into and knock over the chair that's behind him. Davies picks up the chair and uses it as a weapon, while Aston timidly defends his shed. Davies cautions Aston not to come any nearer and pulls out his knife.

*Davies continues to pounce on Aston's insecurities, this time bringing up the shed that Aston will likely never build. The physicality of this scene (Aston rising and moving toward Davies, Davies using the chair and then his knife as weapons) reflects the characters' rejection of language and open communication. They are done trying to succeed in the impossible feat of understanding each other and instead resort to violence.*

Aston accuses Davies of "stinking the place out," which greatly offends Davies. Aston again tells Davies to leave. Enraged, Davies points the knife at Aston's throat. Calmly, Aston tells Davies to pack his things, initiating the task himself as he goes to Davies's bed and places some items in Davies's bag.

*Aston's accusation that Davies is "stinking the place out" parallels Mick's earlier accusation, which suggests that Davies's attempts to drive Aston and Mick apart has failed: the brothers' obligation to each other puts them on the same wavelength, and Davies remains the outsider. Frustrated and unable to communicate this to Aston, Davies resorts, yet again, to violence.*

Davies sputters a weak protest about Aston not having "the right" to do this to him, and about how Mick will vouch for him. Unfazed, Aston brings Davies's packed bag to the door. Davies walks through the door, muttering that he no longer trusts Aston. After Davies leaves, Aston places the chair back in the center of the room. He hangs the blue coat on the wall, straightens the room, and fiddles with a plug as the stage fades to black.

*Davies's remark about Aston not having "the right" to do this to him is plainly wrong, as the building is rightfully Aston and Mick's, not Davies's. Davies's words here mirror the play's opening scene, in which Davies complains about men at the café not having the right to treat him badly and tell him what to do. Just as Davies was likely in the wrong then, he is in the wrong now, yet he lies to himself that the contrary is true. But just as blaming the men did not solve the problem at the café, blaming Aston does not solve Davies's aimlessness or inability to connect with other people. Given that Aston originally gave the blue coat to Davies to symbolize Davies's earning the caretaker position, Aston's decision to hang the blue coat back on the wall symbolizes a reversal of that decision: in hanging the coat on the wall, Aston rips the concept of "caretaker" from Davies's identity.*

## ACT 3, SCENE 3

It's early evening. Offstage, Davies, still enraged, complains to Mick about Aston telling him he "stink[s]." Mick assures Davies he doesn't stink. Mick and Davies enter the room. Davies says Mick's "got sense, not like [Aston.]" Mick stops in his tracks, instantly offended by Davies's assertion that his brother "hasn't got any sense."

*Mick will humor Davies, but only to a point. When Davies mocks Aston for not having any "sense," he crosses a line, and Mick makes his obligation to his brother known. This again suggests that although Mick and Aston have a distant relationship, they still feel an ingrained sense of loyalty to each other.*

Davies tries to backtrack, arguing that Aston has no right to tell him what to do and that he and Mick "can both see [Aston] for what he is." Mick asks Davies about Aston's response to Mick offering Davies the caretaker position. Davies stutters, ultimately relaying what Aston said about Aston "liv[ing] here." Mick admits that Aston has a point—he does live there, even though Mick technically owns the place. Davies suggests that Mick should kick Aston out, and Mick admits that he could do that, since he's the landlord. However, since Aston is a tenant, there are some legal issues to consider.

*Davies doesn't seem to grasp Mick's obligation to Aston, so he continues to mock Aston, insinuating that Aston is some kind of freak for being hospitalized. Davies is desperate to continue living in the building and put off going to Sidcup, where he'll be forced to retrieve his identification papers and face who he really is. So, he tries to test Mick's limits, seeing if there's still a way for him to get Mick to side with him and kick Aston out of the building.*

Irate, Davies tells Mick that Aston should return to the mental institution. Mick says Davies is out of line but quickly changes the subject to talk about fixing up the building. Mick says he doesn't mind putting forth the effort of fixing up the place, so long as Davies is as good an "interior decorator" as he claimed he was, which isn't something Davies has ever purported to be. Davies believes that Mick is mistaken, but Mick insists that this is not the case, as Davies is "the only man" to whom he's confessed his "dreams," and that he only told Davies these things because he was under the impression that Davies was "an experienced first-class professional interior and exterior decorator."

*The reader might initially believe that, at some point during his stay in Mick's building, Davies lied about being an interior decorator to ingratiate himself with Mick, whose dream is to fix up the place. After all, Davies has lied about nearly everything else: his background, his name, his intentions to go to Sidcup. However, Davies appears not to have claimed to be an interior decorator, and Mick only says so to catch Davies off guard and manipulate him further. The irony of the situation is that it would be easy for Davies to agree to Mick's assumption, lying in order to buy himself some more time to hang around the place.*

Davies tries to interject, but Mick goes on a rant, listing all the specific tasks Davies won't be able to do since he's not an interior decorator. Davies admits that he won't be able to do any of these jobs, which results in Mick calling him "a bloody imposter."

*Ironically, the moment when Davies* doesn't *lie about his identity or his abilities is when Mick calls him an imposter. Symbolically, this contradiction points to the meaninglessness of striving for an authentic self, as it suggests that people will be misunderstood whether they lie or tell the truth.*

Mick moves to the chair, puts his foot on it, and demands to know Davies's real name. Davies claims his real name is Davies, but that he goes by Jenkins. Mick insists that Davies must have more names and demands to know why Davies told him he was an interior decorator. Davies suggests that it must have been the "nutty" Aston who told Mick that Davies was a decorator, which enrages Mick. Davies tries to defend his statement, claiming that Aston called himself nutty first.

*Davies makes his situation even more dire when he tries to explain that Mick's misunderstanding about Davies being an interior decorator is something the "nutty" Aston must have said. Given how calculating Mick is, it's possible that he might have predicted that Davies would try to blame the misunderstanding on Aston, thereby giving Mick all the reason he needs to expel Davies from his building once and for all. If so, this is a complicated situation. On the one hand, expelling Davies for the disrespect he shows Aston illustrates Mick's obligation to his brother; on the other hand, it also means that Mick is using Aston's condition to benefit him and his plot to bewilder and torment Davies. The contradictory implications behind Mick's reasoning suggests that even the most outwardly altruistic gestures (Mick standing up for Aston) can be backed by self-serving intentions.*

Mick announces that Davies has been trouble since he first stepped foot inside the house. Further, he decides that he can't trust Davies since he's so "violent," "erratic," and "unpredictable." Mick also states that Davies "stinks," referencing Davies's failure to retrieve his references in Sidcup despite the many reassurances that he would. Mick throws a sixpence at Davies "to pay [him] off for" the caretaking work he's done thus far.

*It's humorous that Mick calls Davies "violent," "erratic," and "unpredictable," since those words could also be used to describe Mick himself. When Mick tells Davies he "stinks," he uses the language Aston has used to insult Davies, which aligns the brothers with each other and, by extension, positions Davies as an outsider. Despite Davies's best efforts, both brothers appear to have turned on him.*

Davies tells Mick he can do this if he really wants to. In response, Mick furiously picks up **the Buddha statue** and throws it against the stove, shattering it. He rants about all the things he has to worry about besides the house, such as his business and the future. He decides he no longer has time to worry about decorating the house.

*The Buddha symbolizes Aston's projection of his problems onto objects, as well as his inability to move forward in life. So, when Mick destroys the statue, he grants Aston the symbolic freedom to move forward with his life. More broadly, the statue represents all the characters' inability to move forward. So, breaking the statue is a freeing move for Mick, as well, which is apparent in his decision not to worry about decorating the house any longer.*

Aston enters the room. The three men remain silent, though Aston and Mick look at each other and exchange a smile. Mick leaves the room. Aston sees the broken **Buddha** laying behind Davies before moving to the bed, sitting down, and fiddling with the screwdriver and plug. Davies watches Aston playing with the plug and wonders aloud if it's the same one and, if so, why Aston can't seem to finish fixing it. He starts to say something about Aston "persever[ing]" and finishing the task but stops himself.

*Aston and Mick's silent smile is significant, given that it's the first time the brothers have communicated with each other (albeit nonverbally) in the entire play. Their bond is seemingly the only thing that gives them some sense of purpose and connection, which suggests that family can be a potential source of meaning and comfort in an otherwise alienating world. Perhaps this is a sign that Aston and Mick might start to become closer, making up for the distance that Aston's disability has forged between them. This nonverbal interaction also suggests that the brothers might be ready to stand together to force out Davies, the outsider, once and for all.*

Davies makes a grand speech about how kind Aston was to give him a place to sleep and what a great friend he's been. He defends his own noisiness, claiming it was really the open window that caused it, and if Aston had only given Davies his own bed, he might not have made so much noise. Still, Davies counters, he understands that Aston needs fresh air after what the doctors did to him. Davies suggests they switch beds so that he can continue in his role as caretaker, but Aston rejects the offer, asserting that he likes sleeping in his own bed; further, the bed Davies has been sleeping in is Mick's bed when he stays over.

*Davies seems to recognize the significance of Aston and Mick's shared moment, so he desperately tries to redeem himself in the eyes of Aston—who, with Mick's support, now holds the power to actually kick him out of the building. Still, Davies can't help himself, and he immediately segues into a rant in which he defends his rude behavior. But Davies's actions here are self-defeating: given how close Aston is to kicking Davies out of the building, Davies should be doing everything in his power to win Aston's favor. Ultimately, though, Davies's almost pathological need to uphold an air of superiority overpowers his attempts at an apology. His impulse to perform a superficial identity overpowers his attempts to be honest and authentic.*

Davies tries to reason with Aston, even offering to help Aston with the shed, but Aston refuses his help. He's made up his mind: Davies cannot stay because he "make[s] too much noise." Davies sputters, wondering aloud what he'll do, making tepid plans to put on the **shoes** Aston gave him to go out and get his papers, but he trails off, never really completing a thought. Meanwhile, Aston turns and looks out the window. Davies moves toward the door. The curtain falls.

*Aston's repeated insult that Davies "make[s] too much noise" is both literal and figurative—Davies literally makes noises in the night, and he also has a tendency to spout superficial, meaningless drivel. That Aston kicks Davies out for this reason optimistically represents a rejection of the artificial and embracement of the authentic. When Aston looks out the window, he literally and figuratively turns his back on Davies, refocusing his attention on his dreams of a future with Mick in their finished home and a wood shed in the back yard. It's important to note that a play that repeatedly stresses the potential meaninglessness of language ends in Davies's unfinished thoughts, followed by silence. On the one hand, the play ends optimistically, with Aston and Mick overcoming their alienating, distanced relationship to join together and expel Davies, the outsider who poses a threat to their relationship and lifestyle. However, the play still ends on uncertain terms: Aston has been staring out the window, dreaming about his shed, without actually taking steps to make his dreams a reality the entire play. It's therefore plausible that he will continue in this way indefinitely—that although Davies is gone, the brothers' meaningless, static lives will go on as they did been before Davies arrived.*

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