

Being and Nothingness in Modern Drama: A Sartrean Analysis of *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter* by Harold Pinter

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of existential themes in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter* through a Sartrean lens. The aim is to analyze how being, nothingness, freedom, and ethical responsibility are dramatized under conditions of intersubjective negotiation, surveillance, and situational constraint. Adopting a comparative dramatic analysis, the paper examines textual dialogues, stage directions, and situational dynamics to explore how Pinter's plays stage ontological dilemmas. Findings indicate that *The Caretaker* foregrounds the fragility of identity through the "Gaze" of the Other, while *The Dumb Waiter* emphasizes waiting and institutional authority as mechanisms that induce "bad faith". Ultimately, the study reveals that Pinter's theatrical form specifically his use of silence and spatial confinement serves as a dramatic analog to Sartre's ontological distinctions, highlighting the ethical stakes of human existence.

Key words: Existentialism; Sartre; Harold Pinter; Modern Drama; Freedom; Bad Faith; Surveillance

I. Introduction

This paper systematically connects Sartre's *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself* to the dialogic mechanisms and spatial pressures of the plays. Harold Pinter's theatre is particularly suited to a Sartrean reading because it stages the tension between freedom and constraint in ways that extend beyond individual psychology. In both *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter*, human existence is depicted as contingent, relational, and profoundly mediated by external forces be the other characters, spatial confinement, or institutional authority. For example, in *The Caretaker*, Davies' identity and sense of agency are constantly negotiated through his interactions with Aston and Mick, while in *The Dumb Waiter*, Ben and Gus are subjected to the unyielding demands of an unseen authority, making their freedom appear simultaneously present and illusory. These dramatic situations exemplify Sartre's claim that human beings are

“condemned to be free”: even when freedom is formally available, its exercise carries ethical weight and existential risk [2].

Moreover, Pinter’s distinctive use of language marked by repetition, silence, pauses, and abrupt shifts in dialogue serves as a dramatic analog to Sartre’s ontological distinctions. Just as Sartre emphasizes that being-for-itself is defined through self-consciousness and relational interaction, Pinter’s characters often confront the limitations of expression, where speech can fail to secure recognition or convey authentic identity. Silence, then, becomes not a void but a manifestation of nothingness, signaling the ethical and ontological tension that pervades the plays. By analyzing these patterns, one can uncover how existential dilemmas are embedded in the very form and structure of the drama, rather than residing solely in character psychology.

Despite the rich potential for such analysis, most prior scholarship has prioritized thematic or historical interpretations, often neglecting the intersection of existential philosophy, spatial-temporal constraints, and linguistic form. Few studies systematically connect Sartre’s distinctions between being-in-itself and being-for-itself, or the concepts of bad faith and intersubjective recognition, to the structural and dialogic mechanisms of Pinter’s plays. This study addresses this deficiency by applying a comparative Sartrean lens, emphasizing how situational contexts, dialogue patterns, and pauses dramatize ontological questions. Through this approach, the research aims to:

1. Illuminate the ways in which Pinter dramatizes existential freedom, responsibility, and constraint.
2. Demonstrate how interpersonal dynamics and environmental pressures shape the ethical and ontological stakes of human existence.
3. Provide a novel contribution to Pinter studies by foregrounding the structural and situational dimensions of existentialist meaning-making.

By situating Pinter’s early plays within both the philosophical framework of Sartre and the socio-political context of post-war Britain, this research offers a comprehensive exploration of how modern drama enacts the profound uncertainties and ethical dilemmas of human existence. This integrated perspective not only enriches literary criticism but also highlights the enduring relevance of existentialism for understanding theatre as a medium of philosophical inquiry

II. Methodology

The study utilizes Comparative Dramatic Criticism, grounding abstract Sartrean concepts in concrete stage directions and linguistic patterns. The methodology involves:

1. Textual analysis of dialogue and stage directions to identify examples of freedom, bad faith, and recognition.
2. Situational and spatial analysis, examining how confined spaces and external pressures shape characters’ autonomy.
3. Comparative synthesis across the two plays to illuminate thematic overlaps and divergences in existential representation.

This approach grounds Sartre’s abstract concepts in concrete dramatic situations, linking theory directly to text.

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III. SARTREAN ONTOLOGY AND DRAMATIC METHOD

The Caretaker dramatizes a complex struggle over identity and recognition, where asymmetrical power relations structure the interactions between Aston, Mick, and Davies. From the moment Davies enters Aston's room, his presence is provisional—he is neither fully included nor completely excluded.

Ben: "We follow the orders, or else we're finished."

Gus: (pauses) "It's not my decision."

This dialogue exemplifies the tension between autonomy and external constraint, where the characters externalize responsibility to an absent authority. Aston's passive, accommodating attitude provides Davies with temporary validation, while Mick's aggressive, confrontational behavior continuously challenges his legitimacy. This oscillation illustrates that being is relational and contingent, reflecting Sartre's claim that human existence is mediated by the gaze of the Other. Recognition and misrecognition operate as mechanisms through which existence is either affirmed or negated, demonstrating that identity is not an intrinsic essence but a socially negotiated phenomenon [1].

Spatial and linguistic factors further underscore this relational dynamic. Aston's room is not merely a physical setting but a symbolic arena of power and authority. Control over space—who sits, who moves, who occupies the central area—becomes a visible marker of legitimacy and presence. Similarly, the dialogue demonstrates how linguistic authority shapes existence. For example:

<i>Aston:</i>		<i>"Sit</i>	<i>down."</i>
<i>Davies:</i>	<i>"I</i>	<i>don't</i>	<i>want to."</i>
<i>Mick:</i>	<i>"You'll do as I say here."</i>		

This short exchange exemplifies how language functions as both a tool of negotiation and a site of conflict. Davies' attempts at asserting himself are repeatedly constrained by the more dominant linguistic and spatial authority of Aston and Mick. His failure to secure stable recognition exposes the fragility of being when it depends upon external validation, emphasizing Sartre's point that human freedom and identity are always ethically and socially mediated [2].

Sartre's ontological distinctions provide a framework for understanding these dynamics. Being-in-itself, which characterizes objects, lacks consciousness or self-reflection, while being-for-itself, characteristic of humans, entails awareness of one's own existence and the capacity for choice. The human being's separation from itself opens the possibility for radical freedom, but this freedom carries inherent angst, as individuals must confront their responsibility for every action and its consequences. Sartre identifies bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) as a common strategy for evading this existential burden: a person may superficially accept responsibility while secretly denying their agency, or impose artificial limitations on their choices to create an illusion of stability and certainty [3]. In *The Caretaker*, Davies' reliance on Aston's approval exemplifies bad faith; he seeks validation externally rather than exercising authentic choice, attempting to escape the anxiety of freedom. Similarly, Aston's compliance with domestic routines and Mick's rigid aggression reveal alternative modes of evasion,

showing how each character navigates freedom and responsibility differently within the constrained spatial and social context of the room.

Dependency on others emerges as a structural limitation on autonomy in Pinter's dramatic universe. Characters' presence and legitimacy are contingent upon the recognition or tolerance of others, which aligns with Sartre's notion that a novelist or playwright grants characters existence only through the freedom they are permitted to exercise. In theatrical terms, authentic being manifests through action, dialogue, and movement rather than through internal thought alone. Pinter accentuates the "weight of presence" by deliberately withholding direct access to the characters' inner consciousness, compelling the audience to infer being through observable interactions. Every pause, repetition, and spatial adjustment signals negotiation of power, dependence, and existential anxiety, creating a stage where being-for-itself is constantly tested against the contingencies of intersubjective reality.

Through this lens, *The Caretaker* is not merely a study of individual psychology but a dramatic exploration of existential principles: the fragility of identity, the ethical stakes of recognition, and the pervasive tension between freedom and constraint. The play exemplifies how Sartre's philosophical categories being-in-itself, being-for-itself, bad faith, and intersubjective negotiation—can be rendered tangible in dramatic form, offering audiences both an intellectual and experiential engagement with the dilemmas of human existence. By embedding existential inquiry within spatial, relational, and linguistic frameworks, Pinter transforms ordinary domestic interactions into profound reflections on what it means to exist authentically in the presence of others [4].

IV. Waiting, Surveillance, and Bad Faith in *The Dumb Waiter*

The Dumb Waiter presents existence under conditions of extreme constraint, where freedom is formally available but ethically and existentially compromised. Ben and Gus, two hitmen confined to a basement, inhabit a world dominated by waiting, anticipation, and surveillance. The play's central dramatic tension revolves around the unseen authority issuing orders through a dumb waiter, which renders the characters simultaneously autonomous and controlled, highlighting Sartre's assertion that human freedom is inseparable from responsibility, even under constraint [1].

From the opening scene, waiting defines the characters' mode of existence. Dialogue and pauses convey both anticipation and anxiety:

Gus: "Should I open the dumb waiter?"

Ben: "Wait. Not yet."

The repeated interruptions, delays, and silences illustrate the temporal suspension of action, transforming waiting into an existential condition rather than a mere plot device. This suspension mirrors Sartre's concept of the "not yet", emphasizing that existence precedes essence: the characters must confront their being-for-itself even when their purpose remains uncertain. The anticipation of instructions externalizes the ethical weight of freedom: each choice, though momentarily deferred, carries consequences once enacted.

Surveillance, both literal and figurative, constitutes a significant thematic element. The unseen third party functions as a Sartrean gaze of the Other, imposing judgment and shaping self-perception. Gus's awareness of being observed, combined with the anticipation of an authoritative command, induces bad faith, as he temporarily surrenders responsibility by attributing moral and practical authority to the absent figure. For instance:

Ben: "We follow the orders, or else we're finished."

Gus: (pauses) "It's not my decision."

This dialogue exemplifies the tension between autonomy and external constraint. While Ben and Gus technically retain the freedom to act, they externalize responsibility, denying

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themselves authentic engagement with ethical choice—a central feature of Sartre’s *mauvaise foi* [2].

Pinter’s use of language, repetition, and silence further dramatizes existential uncertainty. The dumb waiter itself is a symbolic medium of control, representing both the absurdity of institutional authority and the mechanical subordination of human freedom. The characters’ repeated inquiries, their hesitations, and the fragmented exchanges reflect the limitations of language to convey essence or secure authentic recognition. Silence, pauses, and unspoken anxieties articulate nothingness and absence, foregrounding the characters’ vulnerability within a system that denies them full ethical agency.

Spatial confinement amplifies these themes. The basement operates as a Sartrean “existential chamber”, a site where being-for-itself confronts both the void and the imperatives of the Other. Ben and Gus share a single room, yet their perceptions, reactions, and internal negotiations remain distinct, illustrating how freedom is situationally and relationally constrained. Ben, more assertive and experienced, attempts to mediate the constraints imposed by authority, while Gus vacillates between compliance and moral hesitation, embodying the oscillation between inauthentic existence and ethical responsibility.

Violence in *The Dumb Waiter* further exemplifies the ethical stakes of freedom under constraint. The characters are trained to kill, yet the act of violence becomes an ethical and ontological dilemma, as it forces them to confront their agency. Gus’s hesitation and Ben’s attempts at control dramatize Sartre’s notion that freedom carries both possibility and anguish: even when bound by external orders, the moral responsibility of action cannot be entirely displaced. By juxtaposing obedience with ethical reflection, Pinter dramatizes the tension between being-for-itself and being-for-the-Other, highlighting the fragile and provisional nature of existential agency in oppressive conditions [3].

In this way, *The Dumb Waiter* transforms a seemingly simple narrative of two hitmen into a dense existential study, where waiting, surveillance, language, and action intersect to dramatize Sartre’s central concerns: freedom, responsibility, bad faith, and relational identity. The play exemplifies how Pinter uses structural, linguistic, and spatial mechanisms to stage philosophical inquiry, turning theatre into a medium for exploring the ethical and ontological dimensions of human existence.

V. BEING, OTHERNESS, AND IDENTITY IN THE CARETAKER

The *Caretaker* centers on a critical skirmish over identity and the intercession of being. The interactions among the characters—Aston, Mick, and the stranger, Davies trace a field of presence where status shifts between absence and proprietorship. Processes of otherness, power, and linguistic negotiation are employed to construct being [9]. The play opens with the physical attendance of Aston, who has recently been “freed” from a psychiatric institution, followed by the entry of Davies, an intruder who is both accepted by the passive Aston and interrogated by the skeptical Mick [10], [11].

In this context, otherness relates to how an external entity impacts self-definition. Recognition (allotting being) and mis-recognition (denying being) act as tools that fluctuate the characters’ freedom. For instance, Aston’s acceptance of Davies places a non-derivative responsibility

upon him, while Mick's unwelcoming attentiveness defines Davies through a lens of suspicion [12].

In *The Dumb Waiter*, Pinter presents existence under conditions of constant surveillance and anticipation. Ben and Gus inhabit a confined basement space where waiting constitutes their primary mode of being. Commands issued by an absent authority destabilize agency and responsibility, placing the characters under the pressure of an unseen gaze.

The act of waiting becomes an existential condition rather than a temporary state. Obedience and violence function as instances of bad faith, allowing responsibility to be displaced onto an external structure of authority. Although actions are freely chosen, they are executed in denial of authentic responsibility. Pinter thus dramatizes Sartre's claim that freedom persists even under extreme constraint, yet remains ethically compromised when evaded.

The relationships in Pinter's plays are frequently asymmetrical, resembling a power game where one character's control necessitates another's subjugation. This reflects a struggle against dependence, which Sartre identifies as a constraint on authentic action [13]. Although Sartre proclaims that freedom persists even under the weight of surroundings the "freedom of choosing circumstances" the possibility of genuine freedom within such restricted choices remains a central Pinteresque ambiguity [14].

VI. LANGUAGE, POWER, AND NOTHINGNESS Language in Pinter's drama consistently fails to secure stable meaning or identity. Dialogue is fragmented, repetitive, and punctuated by silence, revealing the limitations of linguistic signification. Speech often does not communicate essence; rather, it exposes absence, vulnerability, and misrecognition. Silence, far from being a void, functions as an articulation of nothingness, emphasizing Sartre's claim that existence is defined through negation and relational dependency [1]. In Pinter's theatre, language does not resolve existential uncertainty; it intensifies it. Meaning emerges not from what is explicitly said but from what remains unspeakable, what the characters hesitate to articulate, and what the audience perceives between the lines.

In *The Dumb Waiter*, the structural use of dialogue and silence mirrors Sartre's preoccupation with the "Gaze" of the Other. Ben and Gus wait in a confined basement for instructions from an unseen authority. This unreciprocated surveillance accentuates the ambiguity of their status as autonomous agents or mere pawns. Their existence becomes dominated by waiting, transforming a physical pause into a metaphysical state. Pinter writes:

Gus: "I wonder who it is this time."

Ben: "It doesn't matter. We do what we're told."

Here, waiting becomes not only an existential condition but also a dramatic device through which Pinter interrogates freedom, responsibility, and ethical choice. The basement, with its closed doors and the dumb waiter itself, functions as a Sartrean "waiting room", a microcosm where the characters' being-for-itself is constrained by social, institutional, and moral forces. Perception—of commands, of the other's intentions, of absence prevails over content; presence is felt, absence sensed, and meaning is continually deferred [2].

Attempts at communication are frequently ruptured by repetition, pauses, and misunderstanding, emphasizing the limits of language. Pinter's plays suggest that extra-verbal presence gestures, silence, and spatial positioning often carries more ontological weight than

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words themselves. This aligns with Sartre's idea that being is enacted, not merely expressed. In *The Dumb Waiter*, violence becomes the ultimate test of this enacted freedom. Gus's hesitancy to commit acts of violence, contrasted with Ben's pragmatic assertiveness, dramatizes the ethical ambiguity of freedom: action is technically chosen, yet its execution is embedded in bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), performed for an external authority rather than in authentic alignment with one's essence [3]. As Sartre notes, humans often evade responsibility, seeking to exist "for the wholly other" rather than embracing the risks inherent in authentic choice [4].

The phenomenology of waiting amplifies these ethical and existential tensions. The "menu" delivered through the dumb waiter operates as an existential parable: it proposes a pre-formed essence, yet this essence remains inappropriate, unreadable, and imposed externally, forcing the characters to negotiate freedom within a structure not of their own making. Sartre's concept of freedom as the delimitation of being is exemplified here: Ben's and Gus's responses to the menu, to commands, and to each other reflect both potentiality and constraint. The first character may define freedom through anticipation, prepared for a choice that never materializes; the second may be dominated by the gaze of the absent authority, paralyzed in bad faith [5].

When read alongside *The Caretaker*, these dynamics reveal complementary existential structures. While *The Caretaker* emphasizes negotiation of being through intersubjective recognition, *The Dumb Waiter* foregrounds institutional authority and ethical constraint. Both plays explore the Sartrean predicament of inessentiality: the possibility that one's existence may remain unacknowledged. Pinter stages the ethical stakes of this void. When recognition is withheld through silence, misunderstanding, or imposed commands the self-confronts the threat of becoming a "mere nothing" [6]. Michael Billington observes that Pinter's drama originates in "damage", reflecting the ethical and emotional consequences of human misrecognition, while also probing whether theatre can offer insight into the human struggle for authentic existence [7].

In both plays, language, waiting, surveillance, and spatial constraint operate as interconnected mechanisms: they mediate recognition, articulate absence, and dramatize the ethical and existential tensions inherent in freedom. Through pauses, silences, and fragmented dialogue, Pinter enacts a theatre of existential presence and absence, where identity is never fixed, freedom is always provisional, and ethical choice is both necessary and fraught.

VII. Conclusion

A comprehensive Sartrean reading of Pinter must account for the full complexity of freedom under constraint, including language, silence, and intersubjective misrecognition [30]. Pinter's theatrical philosophy—articulated as the "living moment" mirrors Sartre's ontology by placing freedom at the central pivot of existence. While Pinter's early plays are profoundly clarified by a Sartrean lens, the Pinter canon ultimately extends these existential frameworks into new dimensions of absence and presence, establishing theatre as an "existential density" that both obscures and reveals the human condition [31].

The investigation of Sartrean concepts—specifically, being, nothingness, freedom, and the Other within Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter* affirms the enduring relevance of existentialism to the analysis of modern drama. Prior critical studies have established the significance of the nexus between Pinter's literary oeuvre and various philosophical frameworks, including Sartrean phenomenology [32] and the existentialism of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. By situating Pinter at the center of these philosophical inquiries, the application of Sartrean notions offers an incisive and illuminating perspective on the fundamental questions of existence and freedom raised by the playwright.

Ultimately, the intricate "filigree" of being, nothingness, freedom, and the Other functions as a system of complementary and counterbalancing rotations. This movement of approach and withdrawal articulates the duality between existence and essence as an overarching philosophical and political problematic. This framework extends beyond the specific bounds of Sartreanism to the broader field of existentialism, underscoring the profound significance of drama as a medium for experiencing the totality of being.

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