

Comedy As A Way Of Correcting The Ills Of Society A Critical Reading Of Wole Soyinkas The Trials Of Brother Jero And Harold Pinters The Caretaker

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ABSTRACT: Many a time, some readers and theatre-goers tend to have a misleading understanding of comedy. To such people, comedy is all about laughter and the riff-raff of society. They never associate humour with criticism and as such, the utilitarian aspect of comedy as an instrument for correcting the ills of society is often overlooked. In much the same way, they often tend to overlook the art and skill with which comic writers are able to present the unpleasant in a pleasurable manner and the offensive acceptable. This paper expatiates on the meaning, role, and some dramatic techniques used in comedy through a critique of Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* and Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*.

Index Terms— Comedy, Tragedy, Humour, Absurd Comedy, Kitchen-Sink Drama, Dramatic Techniques, Criticism

1 Introduction

We start by discussing the definition of comedy as given by Aristotle and other critics. This is followed by a discussion of the difference between comedy and tragedy and the respective roles of both genres. This then paves the way for an explanation of the role of humour or laughter in comedy. The rest of the paper has been devoted to the form of comedy in the two plays and the comic devices used by Soyinka and Pinter in evoking humour or a mixture of mirth and menace in their respective works. In Soyinka's play, parody, irony, invective, and exaggeration have been considered as dramatic techniques that have been deftly employed by the playwright to evoke laughter. In the case of *The Caretaker*, irony, repetition, repartee, and farce have been examined as some of the techniques used by Pinter to create mirth and menace in his play.

2 Definitions, Nature, and Role of Comedy and Tragedy

In *The Poetics*, Aristotle observes that comedy is:

... an imitation of those who are worse than ourselves, yet not in every sort of evil but only in that baseness of which the ridiculous is a species. For the laughable is a sort of fault and deformity that is painless and not deadly, pain (Aristotle, 1940:74).

This definition of comedy highlights the importance of ridicule in comedy. Comedy does not criticise people who are worse than us in the sense of their being evil through and through. It simply focuses on the correction of the follies and weaknesses of those being imitated on stage. This explains why in the world of comedy, the audience do not always identify themselves with the protagonist. There is a distance created between the audience and the hero because the former are always privileged with some information that those on stage may not possess. As a result of this, the audience are able to sit back and laugh at the mistakes of the actors. This is the laughter that Aristotle refers to as being "painless". The painless aspect of the laughter does not, however, take away its bite of criticism. J. L. Styan in *The Dark Comedy* also agrees, to some extent, with Aristotle's definition of comedy. To Styan, what induces humour in comedy is "a sense of incongruity with a resulting release of tension." (Styan, 1968:42) The incongruity in this context refers to the discrepancy between appearance and reality in the world of comedy. What is important in Styan's definition is the release of tension through humour. Sometimes, however, laughter and smiles are stifled completely in the world of comedy. Thus, whereas farce may engender roars of laughter among the audience, dark comedy may produce suppressed smiles among theatre-goers. Regardless of the fact that ridicule and the release of tension occupy a central position in these two definitions of comedy, Nellie McCaslin is also of the view that there is yet another important dimension of comedy that is essential to its understanding. In *Creative Drama in the Classroom*, McCaslin defines comedy as:

... a play that ends satisfactorily for the hero or the heroine. Comedy may be funny, but this is not essential according to this definition. Many comedies are serious and satiric (McCaslin, 1990:160).

Thus, the dimension that McCaslin adds to the understanding of comedy is the observation that comedy usually ends well for the hero or heroine. There need not necessarily be roars of laughter in comedy. What is essential is that there is poetic justice at the end of the play. In Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Pedro's effort is crowned with a successful

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marriage between Claudio and Hero whereas Don John's bad deeds are exposed. There is no such poetic justice in *Hamlet* where the audience feel that the tragic hero deserves a better fate in the play. All the preceding features of comedy put it in sharp contrast with tragedy. Thus, while Aristotle is of the view that comedy concerns itself with the ridiculous in order to produce painless laughter, he observes that tragedy is the enactment of an "action that is serious and complete and has sufficient size" (Aristotle, 1940:76). The aim of tragedy is to "excite pity and fear, bringing out the catharsis of such emotions" (Aristotle, 1940:76). Besides, while comedy impersonates people who are worse than us, tragedy imitates people of high moral integrity whose punishment is often incommensurate with the mistakes they make. This is what excites pity and fear from the audience. In his essay entitled *On the Composition of Comedies and Tragedies*, Cinthio summarises the difference between comedy and tragedy by observing that:

...comedy is without terror and without commiseration (because in it there are no deaths or terrible chances, but instead it seeks to bring about its end with pleasure and with some pleasing saying), and tragedy, whether it has ...morals (Cinthio, 1940:252).

This explanation on the difference between comedy and tragedy is condensed to a question of spiritual conflict (tragedy) or social complication (comedy) by George Sampson in *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*. Notwithstanding the fact that the definitions and nature of comedy and tragedy are quite distinct, the two genres of drama converge at a point. They both have one primary objective; the correction of the ills of society and the weaknesses in man. This partly explains why Cinthio argues that "tragedy and comedy have their end in common because both endeavour to introduce good morals" (Cinthio, 1940:252). It is the manner through which the two genres edify man and society that differs completely. The tendency of associating laughter with comedy has often led to some misconceptions about the utilitarian aspect of comedy. To some theatre-goers, what is laughable cannot be considered serious and hence does not contain any moral lessons. Besides, the fact that comedy impersonates ordinary people in the society does not, in the opinion of some people, give it a good chance of being able to entertain and teach us at the same time. A critical analysis of jokes in Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* rather reveals that laughter or humour itself is an instrument for criticism. According to Freud, jokes are always constructed in the form of a triangle. Thus, he observes that:

In addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled (Freud, 1960:100).

The act of telling a joke forces everyone within earshot to become embroiled in the event. There cannot be any neutral position. This is simply because to listen to a joke is to take a position in one way or the other. The third party audience is obliged to take sides in the conflict between the joke-teller and the victim of the joke. To laugh is to ally oneself with the aggressor; to refuse to laugh is to ally oneself with the victim. To do either of the two is to criticise already, and when the audience laugh, it means that they approve the joke the dramatist makes about his actors. If the audience fail to laugh, it means that they do not approve the joke and rather sympathise with the victim of the joke who, in this context, may be our protagonist. In short, humour in comedy functions like jokes and is therefore capable of constructive criticism.

3 Form and Themes of the Two Plays

The Trials of Bother Jero is a farcical play. According to Cuddon, the main objective of farce is to "provoke mirth of the simplest and most basic kind: roars of laughter rather than smiles. It is a matter, therefore, of humour rather than wit" (Cuddon, 1977:307). It is this aspect of mirth that Abrams refers to when he also defines farce as a "type of comedy designed to provoke the audience to simple, hearty laughter "belly laughs," in the parlance of the theatre" (Abrams, 2005:40). Soyinka evokes mirth in the play by placing Jero, a highly caricatured character, in improbable situations that make him act in a very ludicrous manner for the audience to laugh. The presence of the other elements of farce such as exaggerated physical action, exaggeration of character and situation, and the subservience of dialogue and character to plot and situation are further pointers to the fact that we are dealing with low comedy in the play. The theme of the play is centred on false religiosity. This theme is developed through Jero's conception of the church and the duty of the clergy. To Jero, the church is a form of business venture where one has to rely on false prophecies, trickery, and lies in order to extort money from the congregation and the society at large. Jero does not only deceive his congregation that he sleeps at the prayer camp at the beach, but also makes Chume believe that it is religiously inappropriate for the latter to beat his wife. Jero equally uses false prophecies such as the one he makes to the Member at the end of the play in order to win more followers. He does not believe in faith, discipline, and honesty as requirements for the attainment of spiritual edification. *The Caretaker*, on the other hand, is a short play that dramatizes the relationship that exists between Davies, Aston, and Mick. This three-act play has unity of plot and of place. It is also a kitchen-sink drama that mainly takes place at the residence of Aston and his younger brother. The play is also absurd in form since it combines elements of both comedy and tragedy that present life as devoid of any meaning. It is evident that Davies's attitude and actions provide instances of humour and menace in the play. His reaction to Mick when the latter threatens him with an electrolux in a dark room is a source of mirth and danger. But amidst all these qualities of the play, Pinter also shows us that life can sometimes be sad and devoid of any meaning. Thus, Davies is pushed into the street with all its uncertainties and the two brothers continue living in their dream world which has no practical purpose. These are the exact qualities of the absurd theatre that Ionesco highlights when he defines it as that:

...which is devoid of purpose. Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost, all his activities become senseless, absurd, useless (Ionesco, 1968: 23).

The central theme of the play focuses on control over our fellow human beings and over our territories. In the play, Aston's mother tries to control him by sending him to the psychiatric hospital. When she dies, Mick will try to take care of Aston. Later on in the play, we find both Mick and Aston who try to dominate Davies by proposing to employ him as a caretaker. The theme of dominance does not just involve control over our fellow human beings but it also includes our attempt to protect and control our individual territories. When both Aston and Mick realise that Davies will constitute an intrusion into their secluded world of dreams, they protect this territory by rejecting Davies as a future caretaker.

4 Dramatic Techniques Used by Soyinka and Pinter

The first dramatic technique used by Soyinka to evoke laughter in *The Trials of Brother Jero* is parody. Parody, according to Cuddon, is "a kind of satirical mimicry" that is used to imitate the ideas, style, tone, attitude or even the words of an author with the aim of making them appear ridiculous (Cuddon, 1977:640). Parody can be used for both corrective and derisive purposes. In Soyinka's play, parody is used in two instances in scene three alone. The parody in question here does not involve the imitation of an author's style or ideas but the imitation of prayers in a clumsy manner. When Jero decides to pray for spiritual strength to enable him overcome temptation from women, Chume joins him in the prayer. It turns out, however, that Chume is not making a supplication to God but rather commanding Him. The language Chume uses in this instance sounds irreverent and colloquial. These aspects of Chume's language make his prayer devoid of any formality and respect for his Lord. The fact that Chume makes these pronouncements in the position of someone who is asking for God's blessings makes the whole exercise of the prayer a pure parody and this induces laughter. Part of the prayer is recorded as follows:

Chume[Getting more worked up]
Help am God. Help am God. I say
make you help am. Help am quick
quick.

Jero: Tear the image from my heart.
Tear this love for the daughters of
Eve...

Chume: Adam, help am. Na your
son, help am. Help this your son
(1973:154).

The next example of a parody of prayer involves Jero, Chume, and the congregation at the beach. Humour comes from two main sources in this instance. First, Jero is unable to concentrate on his prayer because he has seen the exposed thighs of a woman and has to abandon his congregation mid-way through the prayer in order to go after the woman. This act alone makes one wonder about the sincerity of Jero's

earlier prayer for strength to avoid temptation from the daughters of Eve. The second source of comedy comes from the fact that all of a sudden, Chume is asked to lead the congregation in prayer for the first time. Chume becomes completely confused and does not know how to go about his new role. He simply turns the prayer into a series of commands to God in colloquial English and terminates it by asking for material blessings from God. Comedy in this scene is heightened when Jero returns to his congregation in a completely different state. His clothes are not only torn but his face is bleeding; an indication that he has received some beating from the woman who confiscates the boy's drums. It is as if Soyinka wants to say that Jero deserves to be punished for taking the work of God lightly and for being promiscuous. The next comic device employed by Soyinka is irony. Irony in this context is dramatic since the audience are often privileged with some information that some members of the cast do not possess. This enables the audience to understand the actors well and to be able to laugh at their mistakes. The first instance of dramatic irony that one comes across in the play is in the first scene. When the play opens, we find Jero who claims to be a prophet and goes on to explain why he is a prophet by birth. To him, the fact that he is born with a "rather thick and long hair" is an indication that he is destined to be a prophet (Soyinka, 1973:145). This argument sounds ironical to the theatre-goers since we know that it takes something more than mere physical features for one to be called a prophet. It even sounds more contradictory when one realizes that spiritual growth and discipline which are some of the criteria for qualification as a prophet are rather relegated to the background by Jero. To him, the physical appearance alone is enough to qualify one as a prophet and the audience are not surprised that he turns out to be religious and a charlatan in the play. Another example of dramatic irony in the play can be traced to the fact that Jero claims not to be just a prophet but one of the few true prophets. The readers are aware that Jero does not even deserve the title of a prophet in the first instance. Consequently, for him to declare that he is a true prophet is ironical especially when his words are pitched against his deeds in the play. In the beginning of the play, Jero says "there are eggs and there are eggs", implying that he is one of the true eggs (Soyinka: 1973:145). In scene three of the play, Jero again decides to "distinguish himself more and more from these scum who degrade the calling of the Prophet" by wearing a velvet cap which he buys on credit from Amope (Soyinka:1973:153). He even calls himself the "immaculate" one. The problem is that Jero does not match his deeds with his words in the play. He deceives his congregation that he sleeps at the beach when he actually sleeps at his second residence. He engages in false prophecies and once he realises that Amope is Chume's wife, he instructs the latter to take her home and beat her. This will free Jero from the siege laid on him by Amope. Jero does not seem to be aware that though he might be able to mislead some of the actors, he cannot deceive the audience. Jero's ignorance in this regard pushes him to act contrary to our expectation and this is what really evokes comedy in this instance. Invective is also a comic device used by Soyinka in the play. It is a device in which some actors use derogatory epithets to denounce and ridicule other actors. It is the use of invective that evokes humour. The first instance of invective in the play involves Amope and the Trader who sells fish. Amope's observation that the fish "smells a bit" draws a fury of verbal attacks from

the two women. While Amope feels that the Trader is “a cross-eyed wretch, pauper” and someone who is in a “beggar’s rags”, the Trader is of the view that Amope is a “barren sinner” who has a “flatulent belly.” The Trader even goes to the extent of saying that it is Amope who stinks and not the fish since Amope has not had bath for two weeks. While this verbal exchange goes on, Jero manages to sneak out of his residence without paying Amope the amount he owes her. This provokes another series of verbal abuse from Amope. She calls Jero a “thief” and “a bearded rogue.” She then turns to the trader and addresses her as follows: “Do you see what you have done, you spindle-leg toad? Receiver of stolen goods, just wait until the police catch up with you...(Soyinka,1973:152). As observed early on, it is the diction in the various instances of insults where human beings are addressed as being “cross-eyed”, “spindle-leg”, “barren sinner”, “bearded thief” and “toad” that provokes laughter. Again, invective in this instance enables the characters to denounce one another. Thus, Jero is denounced as a “rogue” and a “thief” which are true about him; and Amope is denounced for neglecting to bath only to enable her lay siege on Jero for several days. This denouncement confirms what the audience already know about the characters and they can therefore afford to laugh at the actors. Exaggeration is another technique that has been employed by Soyinka to evoke comedy. This device involves exaggerated physical action or physical farce and exaggeration of situation. Physical farce has been discussed first, followed by exaggeration of situation. Physical farce which involves exaggerated physical activity of actors and their appearance is used by Soyinka to produce comedy in his play. There is physical farce in the scene involving the fight between Chume and Amope close to Jero’s second residence. In this scene, comedy does not come from the physical action alone but from some of the pronouncements of Amope and Chume as well. Thus, once Jero gives Chume the permission to beat his wife at home only, the latter feels that his period of abstinence is over. As a result of this, whether Amope is able to collect her money from her debtor or not, she must be prepared to go with Chume so that he can get the opportunity to beat her up. Chume even goes to the extent of lifting Amope off the ground and trying to force her to go with him. Amope thinks that Chume is gone mad but he knows exactly what he is doing. Laughter comes from the fact that Amope, who a moment ago has been raining insults on Jero, now runs to him asking for help. Amope even imagines that her soul is already in heaven and asks Jero to pray for her. Humour in the above instance comes to a climax when Amope mentions Jero’s name and Chume becomes curious. Chume now wants to know if Jero really has a second residence. On the other hand, Amope is not aware that Chume is no longer interested in beating her and rather grows more hysterical. But once Amope is able to confirm that Jero has a second residence, Chume suddenly abandons his plan of beating his wife and races off with a bicycle to the prayer camp as if there has never been any misunderstanding between him and Amope. The second instance that involves physical farce in the play is in the scene where Jero decides to abandon his congregation and join the chase involving the woman and a boy with “gangan” drums. In this instance, it is the physical appearance of the woman and the action involved between her and the boy that produce comedy in the play. According to the stage direction, the woman has “sash tightened around her waist, wrapper pulled up so high that half the length of her

thigh is exposed... drummer in no unmistakable manner” (Soyinka, 1973: 161). The physical description of the woman does not just portray her as someone with a ludicrous dressing but as someone who is ready to do battle with the drummer. No wonder Jero is beaten up when he tries to intervene on behalf of the drummer. Jero’s physical state after he got involved in the fray provides another instance of humour. “He is a much altered man, his clothes torn and his face bleeding.”(Soyinka, 1973: 161) Exaggeration of situation comes from the attitude and speeches of both Amope and Chume. For instance, in scene two of the play when Chume applies the brakes of his bicycle suddenly and Amope is obliged to make a jerky landing, she complains that she has broken her foot. This makes Chume suggest that Amope should allow him to bandage the foot before he leaves the scene. Amope refuses to allow Chume to bandage the foot because she is aware that she is only exaggerating. It is this exaggeration of the situation that produces comedy. Also, when Chume tries to get Amope home so that he can beat her, the latter refuses and rather works herself into a state of frenzy. To Amope, Chume is not only mad by trying to send her home against her will but she is also of the view that her husband is bent on killing her. Amope imagines that her soul is already in heaven and asks Jero to pray for it. Exaggeration of the situation in this context is brought to the fore through Amope’s speech as in: “Kill me. You’ll have to kill me...I forgive everyone who has ever done me evil. I forgive...(Soyinka, 1973:166). Consequently, in *The Trials of Brother Jero*, Soyinka uses a combination of dramatic techniques to create broad comedy. In most of the instances in the play, the audience are invited to a rollicking laughter, a laughter that has no tinge of fear, tension, or melancholy in it. Notwithstanding the broad nature of the comedy in the play, Soyinka still manages to expose the ills of his society and to criticise them. Such weaknesses include false religiosity, the gullibility of the congregation, Chume, and the Member due to their love for material possessions. Writing on the functional aspect of Soyinka’s comedies, Eldred Jones in an article entitled *Wole Soyinka: Critical Approaches* observes that:

Soyinka is a serious dramatist in the Aristotelian sense ... Certain plays like *The Trial of Brother Jero* and *The Lion and the Jewel* can be called pure comedies, but even here Soyinka’s concern with serious questions is paramount (Jones,1973:64-65).

With regard to Pinter’s play, the first comic device he uses is dramatic irony. For example, the first encounter between Mick and Davies alone in Act Two is full of dramatic irony. The technical vocabulary that Mick uses to impress Davies that he, Mick, is a serious estate manager does not make any sense. Davies’s level of education does not permit him to be able to understand such technical language. Therefore, if only Mick knew Davies’s background, he would not use such language in their interaction. The other side of the irony comes from the fact that Davies can never afford the figures that Mick quotes for renting part of the house. Consequently, it is Mick’s ignorance of his guest’s background that makes him use special vocabulary in addressing someone who does not understand it and to propose a non-viable business venture to such a person. The difference between reality and ignorance creates comedy here. The plot of the play also revolves

around another form of irony. Thus, both Aston and Mick are willing to employ Davies as a caretaker of their property. Both brothers, however, need to go beyond mere promises and carry out their responsibilities by repairing, decorating, and converting the house into the series of suites that they dream of. Until this is done, Davies will have no caretaking to do if he is employed. The reality is that Aston and Mick are not prepared to leave their dream world. As a result, Aston will always be dreaming about setting up his workshop and Mick will go on speculating about converting the house into suites. And since this is the reality in the play, it is simply ironical and absurd that both brothers should take turns on different occasions to make a job offer that they do not, and will never have for Davies. Situational irony has also been used by Pinter to evoke humour in the play. For instance, when Aston takes Davies home and offers him accommodation, Davies seems to be grateful to his benefactor. When Davies encounters Mick, everything changes between Aston and Davies. Davies does not want to consider Aston as a friend any longer. He becomes overconfident because Mick promises to employ him as a future caretaker. Consequently, Davies treats Aston as a lunatic; he challenges Aston on every occasion and feels that he has a secured job and future with Mick. Davies now thinks that it is Aston who should be kicked out of the house since he does nothing but to idle around. Events in the play, however, show that there is a difference between Davies's thoughts and intentions and what happens. It is Davies who is rather kicked out of the house. This is what creates humour in this instance. Pinter seems to be telling us that one can never be sure of the alliances that are likely to emerge from a group of people. Repetition is another technique that Pinter uses to create humour in the play. Most of the time, repetition is used for emphasis or rhythmic effect in literary pieces. In the case of *The Caretaker*, repetition is used to induce laughter, create rhythm, and to emphasise meaning. This is because most instances of repetition in the play do not just involve certain key words or expressions that play a critical role in the meaning of the sentences. They involve entire sentences or parts of dialogues which are repeated for the sake of humour. In Act Two of the play, when Mick encounters Davies for the first time, repetition is used in their interaction to create laughter. On page thirty of this act, a portion of the dialogue between Mick and Davies reads as follows:

Mick: Jen...kins

Pause

You sleep here last night?

Davies: Yes

Mick: I am awfully glad. It's awfully nice to meet you.(Pinter,1960:30) On page thirty-three of the same Act Two, this portion of the dialogue between Davies and Mick is repeated as follows:

Mick: Jen...kins

Davies makes a sudden move to rise. A violent bellow from Mick sends him back. (A shout)

...Davies: I slept _____

Mick: Sleep well? (Pinter, 1960:33)

Thus, it becomes evident that parts of the dialogue are repeated for the sake of comedy. Mick behaves as if he has just forgotten that a moment earlier, he had asked Davies the same questions that he goes over on page thirty-three of Act Two. It is this attitude of repeating words and sentences for the sake of doing it that brings about laughter. In the same Act Two, repetition is used in the dialogue between Mick and Davies when the former tries to find out Davies's name. When Mick asks Davies of his name, he says he will not answer the question since he does not know Mick. But when Mick insists, the dialogue between them turns out this way:

Mick: Eh?

Davies: Jenkins...

Mick: Jen...kins(Pinter,1960:30)

Five or six lines after this part of the dialogue, Mick goes back to the same line of questioning.

Mick: I am awfully glad. It's awfully nice to meet you.

Pause

What did you say your name was?

...Mick: Jen...kins (Pinter, 1960:30-31).

Thus, in the ten lines of dialogue between Mick and Davies, we find out that the name "Jenkins" accounts for six of such lines. In addition to these instances where parts of dialogue are repeated, a key statement like "you stink" has been repeated on many occasions in the play. Aston uses this statement to address Davies and Mick also uses it to refer to Davies. Much as repetitions, pauses, and silence constitute an integral part of natural conversation, we sometimes feel that repetition is overused to create laughter in this context. We would expect to find such repetitions in a conversation between children or very old people and not in a dialogue between a young man like Mick and old Davies. One other comic device which Pinter uses in his play is repartee. According to J. A. Cuddon, a repartee is simply "a witty or clever rejoinder."(Cuddon, 1977:741). This device is employed by Davies when he tries to evade questions or it is used by Aston to indicate his dislike for a particular topic of conversation. In both instances, the theatre-goers are always aware of the purpose of the technique whereas some of the actors do not understand its significance. This is what usually creates the distance between the audience and the characters and allows the theatre-goers to laugh at the ignorance of members of the cast. The first instance in which we find Davies using a repartee to dodge questions pertaining to his background is in Act One. Aston's attempt to ascertain whether Davies is Welsh does not bring out any meaningful reply from Davies. Davies merely evades answering the question by resorting to the use of witty rejoinders in order to confuse Aston. The irony lies in the fact that Davies might succeed in confusing Aston but he cannot deceive the audience. The

readers are much aware of Davies's tricks. It is, therefore, a mistake on the part of Davies to assume that he is not just being clever with Aston alone but with the audience as well. The dialogue between Aston and Davies involving the use of repartee is recorded on page twenty-five of the play as follows:

Aston: Welsh, are you?

Davies: Eh?...

Davies: I was ... uh...oh, it's a bit hard, like to set your mind back...see what I mean ...going...(Pinter,1960:25)

In fact, Davies cannot mean anything when he has not said anything meaningful. Perhaps, the only thing he means is that he is a tramp who does not want to acknowledge the truth about his origins and his past life. Another example of the use of repartee by Davies can be found in Act Three. Davies uses the technique to avoid Mick's anger when the former inadvertently describes Aston as "nutty." Immediately Davies realises that he has gone too far and that he has just hurt Mick's feelings, he uses repartee to avoid answering a simple question thrown to him by Mick. In this example again, the audience are quite aware of the trouble Davies has created for himself and we therefore laugh at his attempt to deceive us and Mick. The dialogue between Mick and Davies is recorded page seventy-three as follows:

Mick: What did you call my brother?

Davies: When? ...

Mick: Nutty? Who's nutty? (Pinter, 1960:73)

We all know that Mick does not enquire to know "when" Davies called his brother "what" but simply "what" did Davies call his brother. Consequently, for Davies to resort to answers like "when" and "I ...now get this straight" is a sure way of using clever rejoinders to avoid answering the question. The last technique which brings about comedy in the play is physical farce. It is a device that is used in Act Two when Davies is frightened with an electrolux in the dark room. The truth is that Davies is not the gallant fighter that he claims to be. He is a coward. This situation is compounded by the fact that Davies fears an electrolux. Consequently, for Mick to frighten a coward such as Davies in a dark room with such a gadget is something that is too frightening for Davies to handle. The state of frenzy that Davies works himself into and the apparent courage that he tries to demonstrate in this instance are a source of comedy in the play. The audience know that Davies is scared to death and this is what really provokes his bravado to confront whoever is in the dark room. His exaggerated reaction does not come from true courage and though he may be able to mislead Mick in this respect, he cannot deceive the audience. The following lines from Davies's speech in the dark room indicate the extent to which Davies is frightened.

Davies: Come on. Who's this? Who's got my box?

Pause

I got a knife here. I'm ready. Come on then, who are you?

... Get away-y-y-y-y! (Pinter, 1960:45)

Notwithstanding the use of these techniques by Pinter to evoke laughter in the play, we still have shades of menace and sadness in it. Menace in the play manifests itself at two levels: the psychological and the physical. The presence of Davies is a psychological threat to Aston and Mick. His stay is a danger because if he is to be employed as a caretaker, then the two brothers must stop dreaming and live the practical side of life. They must leave their jealously guarded world of fantasy and this is what they are not prepared to do. This is why Davies will be expelled at the end of the play since his presence will continue to remind the two brothers of what they have failed to do and will never do. Maybe, Mick and Aston want to illustrate to us the hollowness of life just as Vladimir and Estragon seek to do in *Waiting for Godot*. At the physical level, Davies represents danger to the two brothers in different ways. He threatens Mick with a knife when the latter frightens him in a dark room. He is ungrateful and disrespectful to Aston who is very kind to him. Again, Davies is an opportunist who tries to set the two brothers against each other so that he can make the best out of the division between them. When Aston helps him, Davies sees him as a good friend but when Mick proposes to employ Davies as a caretaker, the latter finds a good friend in Mick and not in Aston anymore. The tinge of menace and gloom in *The Caretaker* is what distinguishes it from *The Trials of Brother Jero*. Whereas we can afford to laugh our hearts out at the antics of Jero, we are always reminded of the harsh conditions of life for the likes of Davies and the absurd aspect of it for Aston and Mick. This is what prevents a rollicking laughter throughout the length of *The Caretaker* and makes the comedy in it dark.

5 Conclusion

From the analysis of the various issues and techniques in this paper, it is clear that comedy can be created through the use of different techniques. Whereas the comic element may be found in the plot, characterisation, and situation in some plays, it can also be evoked through the deft use of comic devices such as irony, exaggeration, repetition, farce, repartee, parody, invective, and so on in other plays. This therefore makes such comic devices very important in comedy since they become the working tools with which dramatists plug the cracks on the wall of society. The depth and success of criticism on the part of the playwright will depend on the dexterity with which he handles these comic techniques and both Soyinka and Pinter are masters of their own in this regard.

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