

**Western Carolina University  
Graduate School**

**THESIS PROPOSAL FOR MASTER'S DEGREE**

Student's Name: Leigh Taylor Hutchens

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Tentative Title: Some Monstrous Farce: An Existential Examination of Caretakers and Patients in Harold Pinter's "The Caretaker" and the Films of Mike Leigh

Committee Members:

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Director

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Member

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Member

Approved by Department Head

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Approved by Program Coordinator

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Approved by Dean of Research and Graduate Studies

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**PROPOSAL**  
**for**  
**Some Monstrous Farce: An Existential Examination of Caretakers and Patients in Harold Pinter's "The Caretaker" and the films of Mike Leigh**  
**by**  
**Leigh Taylor Hutchens**

**1. PRESENT STATE OF SCHOLARSHIP RELEVANT TO THIS TOPIC:**

Until Mike Leigh's release of High Hopes in 1988, he was an unnoticed filmmaker, despite the fact that he had been making films since 1971. Virtually unrecognized outside of Britain as a credible filmmaker, Leigh plodded away, making his own films, writing plays, and writing screenplays and directing films for the BBC. In 1993, he won the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival for Naked, and was recognized again for his work on Secrets & Lies in 1996, which won the Palme d'Or. Mike Leigh was suddenly acknowledged nearly universally as an iconoclastic, noteworthy filmmaker.

Despite the recent acclaim from the film industry itself, there is very little critical study of his work; in fact, my research indicates that over a decade of his films have been overlooked by both the public and the critics. What little scholarship does exist on Mike Leigh's films typically dates after his award at Cannes for Naked. Some of these erudite examinations concentrate on Leigh's naturalistic filmmaking technique; other examinations focus on his unusual style of filmmaking. Leigh typically assembles a cast of actors together, having a direction in mind but no script. He then works with each actor individually, helping him or her to create a character. The actor then works improvisationally with the other members of the cast to create a plot for the film. Rehearsal for each film usually takes place over twelve or thirteen weeks, and each actor has full creative input into the development of his or her character. By the actual shooting, however, every moment in the film has been scripted, and no improvisation is allowed while the camera is on. Mike Leigh's style of filmmaking, from conception to finished product, is quite different from that of other filmmakers, and he has been labeled an iconoclast as a result.

All of Leigh's films focus on the lives of ordinary, working class people in England. Many of his films have political undertones, whether it be the critique of post-Thatcher England in Life Is Sweet (1990), or the plight of Polish immigrants in England in Meantime (1981). He is commonly referred to as the "maestro of the mundane" because his films often deal with real people in real situations. Only one book length biography on the filmmaker has been written: Michael Coveney's The World According To Mike Leigh. This is an excellent biography, but its critical inquiry does not extend far beyond a naturalistic study of Leigh's films.

## 2. THE DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION I WILL MAKE:

Mike Leigh began studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London in 1960. It was there that Leigh saw a production of Harold Pinter's "The Caretaker," and was, as Coveney reports "mesmerized by the play and that production" (62). He was so struck by the play that he directed it himself during his second year at the Academy. According to Coveney, "The experience had a profound effect on Leigh, and he has been a devotee of Pinter ever since" (62).

Mike Leigh was obviously influenced by the naturalistic dramatist Harold Pinter. But what Leigh achieves in his work goes far beyond homage. Both Pinter and Leigh incorporate into their work the major concepts of existentialism. As best described by Gordon Bigelow, at the core of the works of each is the belief that "human life is understandable only in terms of an individual man's existence, his particular experience of life" (Bigelow 289). Pinter's play and Mike Leigh's films can be considered existential because they explore the meaning of existence through ordinary people with ordinary, even mundane lives. Man, according to the existentialists, lives in a dark world where he is left to contemplate his existence, his meaning in the universe. Johnny, the protagonist in Leigh's Naked, vocalizes this search for meaning when he remarks to a friend, "Have you ever thought, right... I mean, you don't know, but you might already 'ave had the happiest moment in your whole fuckin' life, and all you've got to look forward to is sickness and purgatory?" (Leigh 9). Johnny, as so many characters in Leigh's films and Pinter's plays, is a lower class non-intellectual who contemplates his existence in a world that can be cruel and dark. Existentialism focuses not upon the idea but on the thinker having the idea. The power of his thought is acknowledged, but so, too, is his fallibility, his fragility, and his mortality. The existentialist thinker does not have the answers, and may never have the answers, but the value lies in the act of contemplation.

The emphasis on existentialism is not on idea but upon the thinker who has the idea. It accepts not only his power of thought, but his contingency and fallibility, his frailty, his body, blood, and bones, and above all his death" (290). The existentialist thinker does not have the answers, and may never have the answers, but the value lies in the act of contemplation.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in Existentialism and Human Emotions, declares "existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him. And when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men." On one level, Pinter's caretaker is fairly overt; Aston and Mick need a caretaker for their building, and they turn to another for assistance. But on a subtler level, Pinter explores what it means to be a caretaker in an apparently godless, industrialized society where man is seemingly alone in the universe. Can an individual connect with and care

for another individual? And, more importantly, will this give meaning to the lives of both, one in the role of caretaker, and one in the role of patient. Mike Leigh explores the role of caretaker most explicitly in such films as Home Sweet Home, Life Is Sweet, Naked, Secrets & Lies, and Career Girls. In Leigh films, the caretaker may extend from a mother trying to assist her bulimic young daughter, to a wandering prophet who shows up at an ex-girlfriend's flat unexpectedly because he desperately needs someone to care for him, to a young black optometrist trying to find her biological mother, to two old college roommates reunited after six years, who come to understand their dependency on one another.

T.S. Eliot wrote, "All the world's a hospital, and either you're a patient or you're a nurse." This typifies the existentialism behind both Pinter's and Leigh's work. The art of both concentrates on the caretaker motif: the idea that in order for one's existence to have meaning, he or she will either be a caretaker or the one cared for. This is remarkably explicit in Pinter's play "The Caretaker." Leigh, having admitted that he was profoundly influenced by it and directed it himself, incorporates this very theme into his own work; Pinter's influence here is subtle, yet undeniable.

I will focus on the role of the caretaker and its existential implications by exploring Pinter's "The Caretaker," and several of Leigh's films.

### **3. OUTLINE AND CHAPTER TITLES:**

- I. "Some Monstrous Farce: Understanding Existence in a Dark Cosmos"
- II. "The Existential Milieu: A Study of Major Twentieth Century Existential Themes"
- III. Disconnected: Issues of Alienation and Estrangement in the Post-Modern Wasteland
- IV. "Neither Living Nor Dead: Caretakers and Patients and the Problem of Authenticity"
- V. "Condemned To Be Free: Choice and Consequence"
- VI. "The Age of Anxiety: The Changing Needs of Caretakers and Patients"
- VII. "Do I dare disturb the universe?: Caretakers and Patients giving and finding meaning In the existential world"

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Life Is Sweet. Dir. Mike Leigh. 1990.

Meantime. Dir. Mike Leigh. 1984.

Naked. Dir. Mike Leigh. 1993.

Nuts In May. Dir. Mike Leigh. 1976.

Secrets & Lies. Dir. Mike Leigh. 1996.

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