

Alienation in Harold Pinter's *The Room*

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ABSTRACT

The Room is Pinter's first one-act play and was staged by Bristol University in 1957. It is in this play that the famous Pinterian 'menace' makes its first appearance. It is a story of Rose who along with her husband Bert rents a room as a means of being far away from the madding crowd. For her the room becomes a haven of security from the world outside. The play enacts with rising intensity how this sense of security is eroded by the visitors one by one starting from the house-owner Mr. Kidd to Riley the blind Negro, the man from the basement who completely destroys Rose's security and peace of mind by a message from her past. The significance of the play lies of course in the symbol of the room which plays such a pivotal role in Pinter's dramaturgy.

Keywords: Pinter, *The Room*, Alienation, Comedy of Menace, Security.

INTRODUCTION

Alienation is a means for man to protect himself against those forces which bring about his annihilation in the world of nothingness, which is rooted in the absurd situation. Pinter in his play, *The Room*, shows the absurdity of man's situation through the mingling of reality and symbolism. He also intensifies the sense of alienation by the creation of the atmosphere of menace. As in his interview with Tynan, Pinter further explains: Two people in a room. I am dealing a great deal of the time with this image of two people in a room. The curtain goes up on stage and I see it as a very potent question: What is going on between two people in the room? Is someone going to open the door and come in? --obviously they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room there is a world bearing upon them which is frightening. I am sure it is frightening to you and me as well. [1]

Pinter chooses the room "as a microcosm of the world. In the room the people feel safe. Outside are only alien forces inside there is warmth and light". Therefore, it can be said that the room, where man should feel safe, but because of existential anxieties, he feels alienated both from the outer world and from himself. Rose, as an existential being, experiences this mood of safety within the room where she is: "this room's all right for me. I mean, you know where you are [2]." Though the room itself is entirely concrete and well shaped, it is surrounded by the void; the void is outside the room, beyond the solid walls and the universe in which the room is located seems to be unstructured too. There is no knowledge what floor the room is on or how many floors there are in the house. Rose is not certain of the location of her room as well as the landlord. Moreover, it is cold and dark outside; "It's murder" as Rose puts it.

Security versus Insecurity in Pinter's *The Room*

In Pinter's *The room*, the darkness and coldness outside contrast sharply with the warmth, light and cosiness inside. Rose tries to offset her fears by constant insistence on the cosiness, comfort and safety of her room as against the darkness, coldness and obscurity of the world outside. She is apparently clinging to the known, the comfortably familiar security of her room. "If they ever ask you, Bert, I'm quite happy where I am, we're quite happy; we're all right. You're happy up here" and her room is easily accessible to others as and when she leaves for the outside world. "It's not far up either, where you come in from outside." And "we're not bothered. Nobody bothers us" [2]

This assertion is central to the play, since it deals with other beings, and explores the restraints imposed upon the individual when he comes into contact with other individuals. Let alone, Rose would be content simply to exist, feeling confidence in the flimsy security of her own created world represented by the comfortable and cosy room she lives in. But Rose is not let alone; life for her, as the play proceeds, becomes a succession of anxieties and restraints imposed upon her by the other selves or by her own hidden dreads. These hidden dreads are the results of the struggle of the self with other selves which disturb her being by showing the reality of non-being. The first disturbing factor is the inexplicable world outside. Rose is constantly aware as she keeps referring to its darkness and

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coldness. The second is Bert, her husband who has apparently isolated himself from his wife by silence and refuses to acknowledge the role that Rose as a wife plays in his life. The third is an evasive landlord who fails to reassure her of consistent and protective surroundings. Then, there is the ominous and unexpected intrusion of the Sands couple, the prospective tenants, whose presence explicitly poses a threat to the security of her own tenancy. Finally, the last and the most complete outsider of all the visitors is the blind Negro, who is explicitly associated with darkness and inexplicable forces of life. He not only shatters the balance of Rose's world but also externalizes her hidden fears and anxieties and forces her to face the brute reality of life and ultimately brings about her final disintegration externalized by the loss of her sight. In short, Rose is eventually crushed into a cipher of non-entity. The play builds up to its climax by exploring the impact that each encounter impinges upon Rose's existence.

Traces of Alienation in Harold Pinter's *The Room*

The tension of alienation of a being with other beings springs from the sense of insecurity initially manifested in the relationship between Rose and Bert. Each seems to live in a separate world; Bert has lapsed into silence; Rose is herself isolated within the emotional world of her own creation that conforms to her needs. Rose fusses loquaciously around the room, while Bert is immersed in reading "a magazine propped in front of him" [2].

In this context, Quigley [3] has suggested "we are faced with a relationship that has reached a fixed point of discord, a discord that is not acknowledged by either character but is manifest in every facet of their relationship." By refusing to respond to Rose's continual talk, Bert is, in fact, refusing to confer any significance on Rose's presence in his life. He is also refusing to acknowledge the security of her self-centered world. This is crucial to Rose who can substantiate her sense of security mainly through the other's assurance. It is evident, later, when she pesters Mr. Kidd and the Sands with questions about the scheme of the house and the world outside. Bert's failure to respond to Rose's conversation, leads her to the other options. For instance, to assert her role in Bert's life, she constantly defines for her self a variety of functions in relation to Bert's needs. She also takes the role of mother to him when she becomes anxious whether he has finished his dinner or not:

That's right. You eat that. You'll need it. Go on. Eat it up. It'll do you good. Go on, Bert. Have a bit more bread. What about the rasher? Was it all right? Lovely, week, beer. Here you are. Drink it down.

Or elsewhere, she warns him about going out:

I don't know whether you ought to go out. I mean, you shouldn't, straight after you've been laid up. I don't know why you have to go out. Couldn't you run it down tomorrow? I could put the fire in later.

You could sit by the fire. That's what you like, Bert, of an evening.

Then, she helps him into his Jersey, "you'd better put on your thick Jersey", fetches his muffler and fixes it for him, and assures him cocoa will be ready for him on his return "I'll have some cocoa on when you get back. You won't be long. Where is your over coat? You'd better put on your overcoat" None of these, however, elicits any response from Bert. [2]

To Rose, the room is another means that gives her life security as well as meaning. It is a place that shields her from the vast darkness of the universe and its mystery. "Just now I looked out of the window. It was enough for me. There wasn't a soul about. Can you hear the wind [2] To offset her fears of what lies beyond the room Rose repeatedly dwells on the warmth, cosiness and comfort of her room. "The room keeps warm, whereas it's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder"[2]. The comfortingly familiar and secure room stands in sharp contrast not only with the mysterious and implacable world outside but also with the dark and damp basement. These three locales— the room, the basement, the outside— are merged into one of Rose's longest speeches just before the first intruder, Mr. Kidd, makes his entrance:

This is a good room. You've got a chance in a place like this. I look after you, don't I, Bert? Like when they offered us the basement, here I said no straight off. I knew that'd be no good. The ceiling is right on top of you. No, you've got a window here, you can move yourself, you can come home at night, if you have to go out,... you can come home... And I'm here. You stand a chance. [2]

The first actual intrusion occurs with the entry of the landlord, Mr. Kidd, whose evasiveness and oblique responses to Rose's inquires serve, as much as Bert's silence, to increase Rose's uncertainty about the world outside and, in effect, undermine the security of her room. Being pestered by Rose with questions about the house, Mr. Kidd scarcely ever gives a direct answer:

Rose: How many floors you got in this house?

Mr. Kidd: Floors? (He laughs). Ah, we had a good few of them in the old days.

Rose: How many have you got now?

Mr. Kidd: Well, to tell you the truth, I don't count them now. Oh, I used to count them once... I used to keep a track on everything in this house... That was when my sister was alive, but I lost track a bit

after she died

When Rose asks him if anyone lived upstairs, "Up there?" Mr. Kidd ponders, "There was one but gone now."

Rose: what about your sister, Mr. Kidd ?

Mr. Kidd: What about her?

Rose: Did she have any babies?

Mr. Kidd: Yes, she had a resemblance to my old mum, I think. Taller, of course.

Rose: When did she die then, your sister?

Mr. Kidd: Yes, that's right; it was after she died that I must have stopped counting... [2]

The conversation between them eventually becomes a series of attacks, evasiveness and counter-attacks; Mr. Kidd seems very perceptive in pinpointing Rose's vulnerabilities when he claims that Rose's room has once been his bedroom. This inevitably reminds Rose of her status as tenant and temporary occupant of the room she so depends on:

Mr. Kidd: This was my bedroom

Rose: This? When?

Mr. Kidd: When I lived here.

Rose: I didn't know that.

To Rose whose life is so intimately bound up with the room, this is indeed a vulnerable area. So Rose keeps on repeating herself: "I didn't know that," and "well, I never knew that" [2]

The intrusion of the Sands couple, the prospective tenants, is quite ominous explicitly posing a threat to Rose's own tenancy. Rose's security is again subjected to series of attacks. She is initially shocked and frightened by the discovery of Sands just outside her room. Then Rose tries to get rid of the Sands by denying that there are any rooms for rent "you won't find any rooms vacant in this house." But when Mr. Sands says that "the man in the basement said there was one room, Number seven", the roots of Rose's security are shaken. Her hidden fears and anxieties, previously manifested in her constant dwelling on the security of her world, now actualize themselves as she is told it is her room that is to let. The Sands, as the other selves, not only threaten Rose's real self, undermining her very security, they also, by confirming Rose's fantasies about the basement bring her hidden fears to the surface and implicitly link her with them. Rose's fears are heightened as Mr. Kidd returns with the news that a man in the basement insists on seeing her:

Mr. Kidd: 'He just lies there... waiting'

Rose: Who?

Mr. Kidd: The man. He's been waiting to see you. He wants to see you... you have got to see him.

Rose: See who?

Mr. Kidd: The man. He's downstairs now.

Rose: Who is he? [2]

By this assertion, the presence of the stranger materialises for Rose. At this moment, the reader can distinguish his presence that is the outward projection and concretization of Rose's hidden anxieties. He enters the room with the message of darkness from the outside to her and makes Rose aware of the "delusion on which she is basing her life," as Pinter cited in Esslin [4] remarks.

And now, her hidden fears are externalized and she is forced to face the brute reality of life in the figure of blind Negro. The Negro is the key to all unanswerable questions, which come out of the world of nothingness. He is also a suppressed wish of the Other which betrays the Ego (Rose) by bringing her a message of Non-being (Death). Only by death, the harmony between the selves of the being can be created as the Negro's blindness should be transferred to Rose (Ego). Rose's loss of sight confirms, on the one hand, her fundamental link with the blind Negro and on the other hand, points to her mental deterioration. The loss of sight is a mental rather than a physical state. Rose, who has been afflicted by blindness, is actually being crushed into non-entity along with the herald of death and nothingness which are personified in the figure of the blind Negro. The blind man is an externalization of the Other as he has broken into the room to rob Rose of her true self or identity. Esslin in this context says:

The blind Negro is all too manifestly a symbol, an allegory. He has been lying down below and had foreknowledge of the future. He must therefore be a being from beyond the confines of this world: a dead man or a messenger of death. His blackness and his blindness reinforce these allegorical implications. The blindness in the end belongs to the same category of symbolism that must mean her own death. [5]

Life and Death in Pinter's *The Room*

The play functions as an image of the human condition. It exemplifies the notion that life is not separated from

death. The Being and Non-being are two facts of human existence, that everyone should ultimately face one's alienation of the self from the Other. The play communicates the perplexity of the human situation; man's struggle for security is only one illusion. The universe which is dark, vast, and ambiguous does not allow anyone to deny the reality of un-being. The un-being is an image of the precarious and perplexing situation in which all living beings are stuck and trying to find out their identification in the name of the real self. It is a reality which has been suppressed by the force of the Other, which leaves man alone in the world of nothingness. In this context, Esslin (1968) says:

The room a precarious foothold, to which man pathetically clings, becomes, like Beckett's dustbins urns and sacks, a closure, an impasse, a sealed coffin into which man is born and where he dies, it is that small area of our consciousness, the fact that we exist opens up in the vast ocean of nothingness from which we gradually emerge after birth and into which we sink again when we die. [5]

What is ultimately being conveyed in *The Room* is a complex existential situation. It is meant to evoke a certain mood and a total impression of helplessness and perplexity. It is caused by circumstance in the shape of the other selves that undermine the heroine's existence from moment to moment and finally crush her into a cipher of non-entity.

The sense of the guilt comes out of the man's being; the first and basic fact is: the human being as a being is nothing. This nothingness and the non-existence are the controlling sources of the anxiety a human being faces every moment. For example, Rose, the central figure in Pinter's *The Room*, experiences it precisely. The silence between Rose and Bert is significant. Bert never speaks but Rose tries to fill this silence through talking. Rose's insistence on the security of the room has a close relation to her sense of guilt. Later when the Negro calls Rose Sal, this significance comes to reality. She has lived with Bert under one assumed name. Perhaps, she has been a prostitute that she has no desire to hear about. The fear of outside is a projection of Rose's inner guilt. She fears for her own being to be exposed to the Other. By repeating to herself about the security of the room, she has a desire to fill her emotional needs of being with her authentic self. The room itself is a fixture, it guarantees one's selfhood. Unfortunately, rooms have doors. To be in a relationship, as existentialists say, is very dangerous, it represents an exposure. Thus, Rose has a hole in her side through which the Other has ready access to her deepest being, through which the object as room itself and Rose's identity are liable to flow away. From the opening lines of the drama, this kind of feeling appears. Rose is in a state of total ignorance as she regards what is outside her room: "I've never seen who it is. Who lives down there". With the room, on the other hand, "you know where you are, "you stand a chance"

The moment of exposure of being to the Other comes when someone is at the door, the source of uncertainty and uneasiness. It turns out to be the landlord. Again the sense of guilt is suggested by the lack of information about things. It is as if they are not able to verify what obtains in the strange house. Mr. Kidd's knowledge of things is as fragmentary as Rose's. The ambiguous past of Kidd is also remarkable. He doesn't know about his family, Maybe, Mr. Kidd himself has escaped from his sense of guilt. Later, when the visiting couple, Sands, say that he is not Mr. Kidd: "Maybe, there are two landlords" [2], this claim comes to true. The play proceeds with the ambiguity of guilt and fear, until they are manifested in the figure of one Negro who is called Riley. This Negro has a message from Rose's past. Apparently, she has no desire to accept him. But at the end, she lets him come. In this situation, one crisis is provoked by the entry of the Other into the room. There is a clear suggestion that the crisis is one of identity. Is Rose, perhaps, Sal? The blind Negro may be regarded as an aggressor, as the Other who breaks into the room to rob her of her identity. It seems likely that his function is rather to recall Rose to her true self, guilt, to her past life, or to a confession of her sin. This fact explains his symbolic quality as a figure arising from the depths of darkness, like the Freudian Id or the Jungian Shadow, that is to say, the repressed side of personality. The Negro is a symbol for some hidden guilt complex that brings her a message of un-being which is the main reason for her anxiety and makes her face the final break of her real self that appears to her in the shape of darkness and blindness. Rose, as a being, is inherently sinful.

The final incident also reminds us of the original sin, which is the root cause for man's all sins. Man is condemned because of the existence. He comes to this world with the burden of his father's sin without knowing why. Each being has a responsibility towards the Other, in order to shape his being or fixate it but he has no power to do it. So he submits to what he is condemned to do. Man, like Rose, prefers to conceal his past, which is ambiguous for all mankind, in order to keep his being safe, but it is in vain. The world of un-being doesn't permit any being to operate independently. Finally, it comes and leads him/her to annihilation, as Rose experiences it at the end. This is the fate of all men in contact with the reality of the sin, accusation, and condemnation.

The Room is Pinter's first one-act play in which he portrays the world of the unconscious along with the unknown forces. Pesta, in this context, says:

The Room can also be understood as a psycho-drama in which the room itself presents the island of conscious security afloat upon a dark sea of forgotten memories and vague wishes. Pinter renders the apartment building as Kafka might: impossibly large, so the landlord, if he is the landlord, no longer

remembers how many floors it has. On this level of psychological symbolism, Riley's emergence from the basement may represent the rising of an unconscious impulse in Rose to return to heaven of true security. [6]

So the room is a symbol for Rose's dream, where she can find her security within her own cosy comfortable world surrounded by the hostile, cruel world outside to such an extent that it eventually brings about her disintegration. *The Room* includes some specific components such as cosy, warm light room, a hostile, dark outside world and also a couple, which become the recurrent images of Pinter's later plays. Quigley [3] comments on *The Room*: As far as *The Room* is concerned, it glosses over a vital source of tension in the play: The tension between the desire to be left alone and the desire to know more about what one wants to be left alone by.

Trace of Menace in Pinter's *The room*

The Room, as many of Pinter's critics believe, is one of his most enigmatic plays in which he indirectly depicts the existence of menace and also the emergence of tension in relationships among characters. Rose experiences the existence of menace in her security, and she also says: "This is a good room; you have got a chance in place like the room". [2]. Rose, in her dream, finds her security within herself (conscious, ego) but it is not eternal. Thus, the problem of security as an agent of the conscious becomes highly important and the room as an image of the conscious appears to be a fundamental element of Rose's existence:

This room is all right for me... Anyway, I haven't been out. I haven't been so well... if they asked you, Bert, I'm quite happy where I am, we're quite happy, we're all right. You're happy up here... we are not bothered, and nobody bothers us. [2]

But as the play proceeds, the tension and menace as the results of the conflict between the conscious and the unconscious forces become materialized. The reader perceives that Pinter's opinion about the nature of the room contradicts with Rose's assertion of its advantages, because, what is important is the realization that menace exists and that the individual is vulnerable to it.

The room as a symbol of the conscious is, to Rose, not merely a refuge but a means to escape from worn-out conventions of society which are the symbols of the unconscious world, as it soon becomes clear: "It is very cold out... It's murder... still the room keeps warm". "It's better than the basement, anyway" (*The Room*: 8). Rose tries to keep her security against the unconscious forces by expressing a sort of language which can protect her security. Even she tells a lie and claims that she does not know Mr. Kidd, who is supposed to be the landlord, and in her speech she seeks for sentences which can protect her from any intruder and fortify the fixity of her position in her room:

Mrs. Sands... But Mr. Hudd seems to know Mr. Kidd very well. Rose: No, I wouldn't say that. As a matter of fact, I don't know him at all. We are quiet: we keep ourselves to ourselves. I never interfere. I mean why should I? We have got our room. We don't bother any one else. That's the way it should be. I don't know about the house. [2]

Rose's uncertainty and fear become intensified when Mr. and Mrs. Sands as the agents of the unknown forces of the unconscious give a frightful description of the basement, "It smelt damp to me. "It seemed to me darker the deeper we were going" (*The Room*: 33). Mrs. Sands' further details and descriptions of the basement as a symbol of the Unconscious, aggravate Rose's fear of insecurity:

So we went down to the basement... It smelt damp to me. Anyway, we went through a kind of partition, then there was another partition, and we couldn't see where we were going. Well, it seemed to me it got darker... the further we went in; I thought we must have come to the wrong house. [2]

As the story progresses, along with fear and anxiety, Rose's pipedreams gradually diminish. Her fear and anxiety get reinforced. Mr. Sands says that a "voice" told him that the number seven was going to be vacant. "The man in the basement said there was one room number seven". It is Rose's room and, at this time, Rose's only hold on security, and with Mr. Sand's query the very basis of her existence is shaken and in her reaction she frantically says: "That's this room... This room is occupied" [2].

In the light of these incidents the agents of menace are externalized more and provide sufficient means for collapsing Rose's being (Conscious). It happens when Mr. Kidd arrives. He tells Rose that a stranger from the basement insists on coming into the room and asks Rose to return to home:

Mr. Kidd: you have got to see him.

Rose: Who? (Pause)

Mr. Kidd: The man, he's been waiting to see you. I can't get rid of him... you have got to see him.

Rose: Who?

Mr. Kidd: The man. He's downstairs now... He just lies there, that's all, waiting. [2]

This episode shows the activity of the Unconscious. At this moment, the forces are out of control and nobody can resist. It also provides the destruction of Rosie's Conscious. This is a moment of death as Mr. Kidd describes. He talks about an unnamed man who claims to be Riley. Riley is the same shadow of Rose's nightmare that has come out of her Unconscious. Rose, from the beginning of the drama, has tried to repress this shadow of darkness and blindness within her unconscious but now it has materialized as a menacing figure. Eventually, he enters Rose's room and claims that he has brought a message from her father, a message of collapse, annihilation. Rose is horrified and her longings and projections for having a secure refuge are frustrated. The shadow of darkness has transferred from the basement to the room which was once lighted. This condition is followed by Bert's firm reaction. He beats Riley to death and Rose begins to clutch her eyes. Now, she comes to reality and to an awareness of her existence that has been suppressed in her unconscious for all these years. Here is her statement: "I can't see, I can't see [2]

This scene is completed when perfect darkness falls over the stage at the end of the play. The closing scene reinforces the symbolic interpretation of the play. The Negro may be considered as a symbol for the Unconscious which is mingled with the blindness of Rose. If we consider the dark, damp, gloomy labyrinth in the basement as Rose's own unconscious where all human desires, longings, dreams, fears lie, the external world and menace also becomes internalized. In relation to Rose's realization of what has already obsessed her mind, we can now observe that her fear actualizes itself as her inevitable fate— her disintegration or death.

CONCLUSION

In *The Room*, Pinter chooses the room "as a microcosm of the world. In the room the people feel safe. Outside are only alien forces inside there is warmth and light". Therefore, it can be said that the room, where man should feel safe, but because of existential anxieties, he feels alienated both from the outer world and from himself. In *The Room*, Rose, as an existential being, experiences this mood of safety within the room over and over.

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