

**Pinter's Use of A Room as A Setting in His Plays**

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the Masters of Arts in English Language and Literature**

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## **Pinter's Use of A Room as A Setting in His Plays**

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## **Introduction**

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## Introduction

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Harold Pinter (1930 –) is probably the subject of more academic commentary than any other living playwright. Born in Hackney in London's East End, he is the child of working-class Eastern European Jewish ancestry, and studied at London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and Central School of Speech and Drama. He is one of the most influential English playwrights

of his generation. He is regarded as “a complete man of the theatre” (Bold, 7), for he is equally proficient as an actor, director or playwright. He has written in different genres and his work displays his expertise in ‘various voices’. Using apparently commonplace characters and settings, he invests his plays with an atmosphere of fear, horror and mystery. The peculiar tension he creates often derives as much from the long silences between speeches which are ambiguous, yet vividly vernacular. His austere language is extremely distinctive. His plays frequently concern themselves with struggles for power in which the issues are obscure and the reasons for defeat and victory undefined. A common aphorism about Pinter's play is “A film with the final reel missing” (Copeland, unnumbered).

Critics often remark that Pinter's early life has had a great impact on his plays. He has had a background of two periods of evacuation and anti-Semitic violence in London in the immediate post-world war II years. From the psychoanalytical point of view, this

vulnerable early life may have had a great influence on Pinter and his theatrical productions, as Pinter himself has described. His work explores the human condition in the 20th century and reveals the impact of 'existentialism'. The Swedish Academy in its citation (in 2005) notes, "Pinter restored theatre to its basic elements: an enclosed space and unpredictable dialogue where people are at the mercy of each other and pretence crumbles". Russell Celyn Jones suggests that Pinter's drama is "framed chaos" (quoted in Inan, 22). Inan also notes that "it is a romanticized framing of twentieth century chaos that in the hands of a poet-playwright, has found an impressive voice and a cultivated visuality. As opposed to other literary figures of our own age such as Eliot or Beckett, who wrote of the banality of corruption and pursues and formulates the poetics of many contemporary issues (rationalism, nationalism, democracy, masculinism) to irony, criticism and mockery, simultaneously celebrating and disturbing them" (22-23). He has perhaps become the only leading English Playwright to imagine the world from the viewpoint of colonized peoples rather than from a Western perspective and has shown the power to understand and share the other's version of the world. Pinter has own many prestigious awards. The honour of the Nobel Prize awarded to him in 2005 has given him ever more worldwide recognition.

*The Room* saw Pinter's debut as a playwright in 1957. Niaz Zaman notes, "Though Pinter began writing in the shadow of Beckett and was initially known as an absurdist, there are subtle but important differences between Pinter and Beckett" (*New Age*). 'The anxiety of tradition' (theory of Harold Bloom) has always been a fact to consider in Pinter's plays but the originality of tone proves him as 'an individual talent'. He is

credited with the invention of a new dramatic style known as the comedy of menace and the tone of this new art is so unusual that it has led to the epithet 'Pinteresque'. This blanket term signals the inimitable dramatic style of Pinter. The inevitability of non-communication comes out in the repeated dialogues, silences and pregnant pauses, conveying the maximum tension through minimum information about characters. They articulate invasion by stranger/s, power relationship and fear, insecurity, inevitable isolation and led to the fusion of comedy and menace.

All these take place within an enclosed space, 'a room', very much detached from the outside world. Including the debut play *The Room*, most of Pinter's major plays are set in a single room (*The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, *Old Times*, *No Man's Land*), where the occupants are threatened by forces or by people whose intentions are never explained or understood either by the characters or by the audience. This 'room' is not often specified or located, like the palm tree in the desert in Beckett's *The Waiting for Godot*, but always serve as a crucially significant setting.

Of course, setting is an essential ingredient for every literary work. M.H. Abrams defines the word thus:

The overall setting of a narrative or dramatic work is the general locale, historical time and social circumstances in which its action occurs; the setting of a single episode or scene within a work is the particular physical location in which it takes place ... When applied to a theatrical production, "setting" is synonymous with décor and mise en scène, which are French terms denoting both the scenery and



the properties, or moveable pieces of furniture, on the stage. The term “mise en scène” sometimes includes also the positions of the actions in a particular scene.

(“Setting”, 193)

Abrams’s definition of setting is more apt to Pinter’s plays where characters and their actions are firmly linked with the setting. The setting is not simply a location in Pinter’s plays, it also leads to a psychological warfare. This present study investigates the psychological possibilities of Pinter’s typical setting of ‘a room’. A ‘room’ hints at different meanings depending on different contexts. This study has selected *The Room* (1957), and *The Caretaker* (1959), and will try to focus on almost all the possible explanations for Pinter’s use of a single room as a setting in these plays.

In Pinter’s early plays, the stage setting, ‘a room’ is not merely a place confined by walls and a roof. The stage space literally defines the living perimeters of the inhabitants, and the action of the play. It also focuses on the occupant’s position of control and his social standing. But when it is an enclosed space, ‘a room’, it becomes a territorial space where the sense of belonging, the sense of possession, and the idea of power or domination appear as a matter of consequence.

Pinter positions his characters in a setting in such a way that it seems to the audience as inevitable when they first come across it. Later, the setting is seen to blend with the happenings gradually. What Pinter has noted about his method is worth quoting at this point:

I have usually began a play in quite a simple manner; found a couple of characters in a particular context, thrown them together and listened to what they said, keeping my nose to the ground ... (quoted in Naismith, 5).

This particular context is always 'a room with a door'. Pinter states, "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 the stage, and I see it as very potent question: What is going to happen to those two people in the room? Is someone going to open the door and come in?" (quoted in Esslin, 235). The door is the partition between this confined room and the outer world. When the door is opened, any force or people may enter as a representative of the outside world. Then the 'room temperature' is bound to change. As Roger Copeland notes:

The essential ingredients rarely change: A room, a safe enclosed space of some sort. Characters who feel not only secure, but "at home" in that space. An unexpected visitor whose very presence evokes a sense of dread, of inexplicable threat – a fear that seems at first, unfounded, even paranoid. Then ... almost imperceptibly, an "invasion" begins; and the boundaries between inside/outside, familiar/unfamiliar, safe/unsafe, self/other begin to blur. Eventually, territory changes hands and roles are reversed. The battlefield may be domestic, but the tactical maneuvers are as complicated as many military scenario ever studied at West point. And no matter how violent or unsettling the outcome, language – and its necessary complement, silence – remains the principal weapon with which these wars are fought (unnumbered).

The inflowing of the outside world into the room through 'an unexpected visitor' is really crucial, especially when the inhabitants of the room are scared to communicate with the outer world. Pinter explains the situation in this way, "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." (quoted in Esslin, 235).

Many scholars remark that space in Pinter's work has involved distinct and limited interpretations of 'the room'. It is not an ordinary room. This 'room' appears as a symbolic space. Katherine Worth comments on Pinter's 'room' as, "psychic space, a speck of consciousness cursed with a vivid awareness of its own significance and insecurity in a world ruled by forces outside itself" (quoted in Inan, 6). At one level, the 'room' maintains personal and social status and safety. On another, it indicates that human beings are always worried about outside reality. So, we hide ourselves into 'a room', an illusionary space in the name of peace and safety. According to Ganze, "the room becomes for Pinter a way of blocking out the diffuse claims of the external world" (quoted in Stone, unnumbered).

From the Freudian viewpoint, the room can be viewed as 'womb- substitute', a 'comfortable world' bounded by four walls. But the tension inside never ends, as fear is centered on the unexpected knock on the door that is bound to be heard sooner or later. The world then can no longer be a peaceful place. The anxiety for the existence contaminates the fresh air inside it. Ultimately the 'womb' turns into a 'tomb'. Kafka's

short story “The Burrow” similarly sees its setting embodying the same stressful situation resembling the violated space where Pinter’s enclosed characters suffer. Kafka’s insecure burrowing creature shares the same sort of anxiety as can be seen in the following monologue:

in reality, the burrow does provide a considerable degree of security, but by no means enough, for is one ever free from anxieties inside it? ... simply by virtue of being owner of this great vulnerable edifice I am obviously defenceless against any serious attack (quoted in Stevenson, 36).

Nothing can protect the inmates of the burrow or the room from the fatal insecurity that waits outside the small boundary of the once comfortable world of their denizens. The outside world may be the black abyss of modern world or can symbolize our unconscious terror about the unbearable truth that can invade our lives and threaten it. Whatever that truth may be, the fact is that we are purely helpless before this overwhelming force. We can only hide ourselves in a provisional shelter for a time.

Pinter’s *The Room* is set in the archetypal Pinteresque unlocated interior – ‘A room in a large house.’ Bert and Rose, whom the audience cannot distinguish initially, occupy it. Gradually we find out that they are husband and wife. Till the brutal ending the husband remains silent and is constantly ministered to by his attentive chattering wife. Rose’s only concern is for their ‘room’. To Rose, the ‘room’ is a place of safety, security and retreat, symbolizing the illusions protecting a man from a hostile world. Esslin suggests that, “The room becomes an image of the small area of light and warmth that 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” (236). Rose is satisfied to be here. Once she says to Mr. Kidd, “Well, Mr. Kidd, I must say this is a very nice room. It’s a very comfortable room” (Pinter, *Complete Works*, 108). She believes that the outside of the room is not at all comfortable; rather, it is ‘cold’ place. As she puts it, “It’s very cold out, I can tell you. It’s murder” (Pinter, *Complete Works*, 101).

In fact, the outside world appears before Rose as a threat and the intruders from that world bring with them the menace of dispossession. The risk to the inmate(s) of the room is exposed as it is serially invaded by characters who pose an increasing threat to Rose’s secured space:

MR. SANDS. The man in the basement said there was one. One room.

Number seven he said.

*Pause.*

ROSE. That’s this room. (Pinter, *Complete Works*, 118)

Eventually, Riley, a blind Negro, intrudes into her enclosed world. Though his intentions are not clearly explained, Rose sees him as a threat:

RILEY. This is a large room.

ROSE. Never mind about the room. What do you know about the room? You know nothing about it. And you won’t be staying in it long either. My luck. I get there creeps come in, smelling up my room. What do you want?

(Pinter, *Complete Works*, 123)

Pinter's own comment on *The Room* makes this motif clearer:

This old woman is living in a room which she is convinced, is the best in the house, and she refuses to know anything about the basement downstairs. She says it's damp and nasty and the world outside is cold and icy and that in her warm comfortable room her security is complete. But of course it is not an intruder [sic] comes to upset the balance of everything, in other words points to the delusion on which she is basing her life (quoted in Behera, 22).

Rose can be compared here to Robinson Crusoe. Both of them are happy with their illusion. To Rose, the room is the most secured place. To Crusoe, the island is his undisputed paradise. But the reality is what both of them are scared to face. Rose never wants to admit that the reality is staying outside her room. And Crusoe wants to believe that none but he is the master of the island. To Rose, reality appears through a black blind man, Riley and Friday, a cannibal throws the ultimate challenge of reality to Crusoe. Eric Berne quotes, "When you think you are secure, having possession of everything on the body of land and no one to dispute your sovereignty, along comes somebody who wants to eat you, somebody who has been lurking in the background all along and who now must be dealt face to face" (334). It is the tension that grips one as one is confronted with reality. Both Rose and Crusoe go through this process. In fact, it is not Friday or Riley who comes to disrupt the land of peace. It is the reality which Rose or Crusoe always want to avoid by hiding themselves in the land of illusion.

So, the role of 'a room' in *The Room* depends on Rose's psychological makeup. How Rose differentiates between the world inside the 'room' and the one outside it, how she perceives her own existence will be analyzed in Chapter One of this dissertation.

The fight for a room of one's own as a symbol of one's place in the world is the theme of Pinter's second full-length stage play, which brought him his first great success with the public – *The Caretaker*. Here personal power and the tussle over the occupation of space between three characters – Davies, Aston and Mick – are explored. All of these characters are placed in awkward positions. In the beginning, Aston willingly invites Davies – a poor, but fastidious drifter whom Aston chooses to rescue out of a fight at some café and provides him with a bed, a key and money. When Aston asks him in Act One to sit down, Davies replies, "Sit down? Huh ... I haven't had a good sit down ... I haven't had a proper sit down ... well, I couldn't tell you ..." (Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 7). What he is unable to put into words is his pathetic and obvious need to be protected from a fundamental insecurity and homelessness. He has lost not only his place in the world he also lacks 'identity'. We find Davies being offered the job of caretaking. Getting a shelter in the room and the offer of caretaking means a confirmation of 'identity' to him. But he is unable to have self-control and tries to play the brothers off against each other. Mick says to Davies:

What a strange man you are. Aren't you? You're really strange. Ever since you came into this house there's been nothing but trouble. Honest, I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations. Most of what you say is lies. You're violent, you're erratic, you're

just completely unpredictable. You're nothing else but a wild animal, when you come down to it. You're a barbarian. (Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 73)

Finally, his attempts to exploit what he perceives as the differences between the two brothers cause his expulsion from the room.

On the other hand, though Aston and Mick are brothers, they appear as two different and isolated individuals. Their dreams about their single-roomed house prove their individuality. Aston says to Davies in Act Two, "Once I get that shed up outside ... I'll be able to give a bit more thought to the flat, you see" (Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 40). Mick informs Davies about his wish in Act Three, "... I could turn this place into a penthouse..." (Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 60). It's the same room they live in, but they are isolated from each other. They never converse with each other. The play starts with Mick, all alone in the room. The ending shows that Aston remains silent and alone. The room seems to be a dystopia where there is complete absence of harmony and this is the place where isolation is prominent rather than togetherness.

The most important thing about the 'room' is its ambience – "... a couple of suitcases, a rolled carpet, a blow-lamp, a wooden chair on it's side, boxes, a number of ornaments, a clothes horse, a few short planks of wood, small electrical fire and a very old electric toaster..." (Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 6). All the items described have been assembled in the room over the years. But the items have no meaning as a whole. They are completely unrelated things as are the brothers. Ultimately, the cumulative effect of focusing on the



details of the room is to heighten the importance of the room itself, which becomes the object of Davies's ambition and downfall.

Instead of the threat from the outside world, personal power is prominent here. In Act One, Aston is the controlling power, though he is not all a voluble person. In the first half of Act Two, Mick is the authoritative presence in the room. When Davies gets the idea that Aston had some sort of psychological treatment in the past, he tries to show his superiority over Aston.

The room here is different from that of *The Room*, where the sense of dispossession is prominent. A room for Davies is a marker of identity. To Aston or Mick, a room is a space for privacy, isolation and individual dreams. They do not want to be disturbed in their room in any way that would disturb their individual life-styles. As Naismith puts it, "We all live in rooms which contain our possessions and reflect our personal interests. If we invite people into our house/flat/room it is usually with a tacit understanding that the guest will leave at a suitable moment. If they don't or won't we are likely to be in trouble" (5). Aston welcomes Davies in their house and gives him shelter. Davies says that he is waiting for the weather to improve so that he can get to Sidcup and reclaim his 'papers', which he needs to confirm who he is. But his tendency to get more advantage than he deserves makes him want to exploit the environment of the house to the full. He finds Mick more proactive than Aston. Consequently he is deluded into a very false sense that his future security rests more with Mick than with Aston. He thus tries to get favors from Mick and avoids Aston. Ultimately, the brothers find Davies nothing but a greedy

old tramp, who is the only problem in their lives. Aston commented to Davies in the last Act, “You make too much noise” (Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 77). So, Davies is supposed to leave and surrender to the uncertain world outside again.

Whatever Davies does is for his survival. His unsettled identity forces him to grab every single chance that he gets. He even oversteps to access his brothers’ private world. He is afraid of the fact that “He who eats shall be eaten” (quoted in Berne, 334). Chapter Two “*The Caretaker: A Room of One’s Own*” will examine different roles of ‘room’ focusing on the characters’ own interests and perceptions.

In both plays, we see Pinter’s characters in the process of adjusting to the world. At this point of adjustment they are busy solving their basic problem – whether they will be able to confront, and come to terms with, reality at all. Considering these situations, the upcoming chapters will examine how ‘a room’ constitutes the total environment of these two selected plays and how this ‘room’ is related to the physical and verbal reactions of the characters.

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## Chapter One

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### *The Room: Illusion Vs Reality*

## ***The Room: Illusion Vs Reality***

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In Pinter's plays, there are hardly any solutions and resolutions. The only issues are motives that defy any firm definition and classification. So the things that appear one after another can never be taken at face value. The language of symbols is the only possible substitute to articulate the basic paradox of a human condition characterized by fears and desires and the feelings and the responses of the characters. To clarify Pinter's use of symbol, Behera notes in his *Reality and Illusion in the Play of Harold Pinter*, "There is something beyond realism, which could be expressed through the language of symbol. Certain characters, situations, and objects exist both on the symbolic level and on the realistic plane. They together symbolize the paradox of reality and illusion" (81).

The most used symbol in Pinter's plays is 'a room'. In *The Room*, it's not only the subject of the title, but also suggests the idea that the more a man wants to escape from reality by keeping him/herself enclosed in an illusionary world, the more s/he becomes helpless in facing reality. In this play Rose, the immured heroine, is an escapist, who persuades herself to believe that 'a room' is a place of security, a place of refuge and well-being. She wants to convince herself that 'the room no- seven' is her ultimate place of peace. In contrast, the outside world is a real mess to her.

From the very beginning, Rose tries to get satisfaction about her existence in from room. It is a very simple and ordinary room, "*A room in a large house. A door down right. A gas-stove and sink, up left. A window up centre. A table and chairs, centre. A rocking-chair, left centre. The foot of a double-bed protrudes from alcove, up right.*"

(Pinter, 101). The life style of the inhabitants of the room is also ordinary. But what is distinctive is the environment inside the room and that is not fully harmonious. Rose is busy in assessing the quality of the room and comparing it to other parts of the house. She says to Bert, her silent and passive husband, "Still, the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, anyway" (Pinter, 101). She doesn't wait for Bert's reply and adds, "I don't know how they live down there" (Pinter, 101). She, in fact, intends to claim some sort of fulfillment about her survival. But she is unable to hide the tension, which is present prominently throughout the play. This is the tension of being thrown out from paradise which results from her fear of dispossession. Though she claims that nobody bothers them, she herself bothers others. Occasionally, dark fears bubble to the surface as Rose evidences a morbid curiosity about what lurks in the basement of the house, "I've never seen who it is. Who is it? Who lives down there?" (Pinter,102). There is a continuous battle happening in her mind between satisfaction and fear. She takes control on her mind, "But I think someone else has gone in now. I wouldn't like to live in that basement. Did you ever see the walls? They were running. This is all right for me" (Pinter, 102). She insists on her own contentment:

... I'm quite happy where I am. We're quite, we're all right. You're happy up here. It's not far up either, when you come in from outside. And we're not bothered. And nobody bothers us" (Pinter, 103).

In whatever Rose says to Bert about the room, she tries to re-assure him of the coziness of her small world:

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 no good. The ceiling 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 do your job, you can come home, you're all right. And I'm here. You stand a chance (Pinter, 105).

But within her one-way conversation with Bert, her activities become restless. Readers/audiences can easily trace her unconscious uneasiness – *She rises and pours out tea at table. She sits at table. She wraps her cardigan about her. She rises, goes to the window, and looks out. She stands, looking. Pause. Pause. She drops curtain. She goes to the rocking chair, sits and rocks...* (Pinter, 104). As she is unconsciously tensed, she feels that the enemy is waiting outside a bush. Then a knock on the door scares her:

*A knock at the door. She stands.*

Who is it?

*Pause.*

Hallo!

*Knock repeated.*

Come in then.

*Knock repeated.*

Who is it?

*Pause. The door opens and MR KIDD comes in.*

(Pinter, 105)



The entrance of Mr. Kidd, the landlord of the house, makes Rose a bit uneasy. Her tension increases when Mr. Kidd claims that the room was his bedroom before they came. Rose tries to avoid the issue:

MR KIDD. This was my bedroom.

ROSE. This? When?

MR KIDD. When I lived here.

ROSE. I didn't know that.

MR KIDD. I will sit down for a few ticks. (*He sits in the armchair.*)

ROSE. Well, I never knew that.

MR KIDD. Was this chair here when u came?

ROSE. Yes. (Pinter, 107)

Rose evades this issue for fear of revealing something offensive which may destabilize her possessiveness about the room. Holding back her tension, she enforces her illusion emphasizing the word 'must', "Well, Mr Kidd, I must say this is a very nice room. It's a very comfortable room" (Pinter, 107).

Meeting Mr. Kidd Rose's sense of insecurity increases more and more. This is expressed later through her movements – ... *She stands, watching the door, then turns slowly to the table, picks up the magazine, and puts it down. She stands and listens, goes to the fire, bends, lights the fire and warms her hands. She stands and looks about the room...goes to the door and opens it* (Pinter, 110-111). For a second time her room is invaded by Mr. and Mrs. Sands, who are looking for the landlord of the house to rent a room for themselves. A man in the basement informs them that there is a room vacant

and that it is – ‘number seven’. Rose replies, “This room is occupied” (Pinter, 118). But she feels the sense of occupancy is being shattered incessantly. The dark outside world gradually comes closer to Rose through invasion one after another. She tries to figure out the dark outside and asks Mrs. Sands:

ROSE. What’s it like out?

MRS SANDS. It’s very dark outside.

MR SANDS. No darker than in. (Pinter, 113)

Ironically, the darkness that is indicated here is more frightening than that of the outside world. This darkness is inner inadequacy of Rose, which encloses her into a castle in the sky. This darkness is the deficiency that disables her from confronting the challenge of outside world.

The fact is that Rose bases her life on delusion and never comes out of that. What she is doing is living on false happiness. She is always scared of chaos and disorder of the outside world where a common man has no ‘room’ and no individuality. But in the ‘room’, in her own made-up world, she is satisfied with a peaceful identity as ‘Rose’. Avoiding reality can never lead to a true identity. It’s like a building made of only sands that ultimately has to collapse. The same happens to her. When Mr. Kidd appears for the second time Rose receives the final ultimatum to face the reality. Mr. Kidd informs her someone is waiting to see her downstairs. But she is not willing to meet the person and face the unknown:

ROSE. See him? I beg your pardon, Mr Kidd. I don’t know him. Why should I see him?

MR KIDD. You won't see him?

ROSE. Do you expect me to see someone I don't know? With my husband not here too?

MR KIDD. But he knows you, Mrs Hudd, he knows you.

ROSE. But how could he, Mr Kidd, when I don't know him?

MR KIDD. You must know him. (Pinter, 120)

Here the word 'must' is the fatal challenge of reality that Rose is supposed to deal with. To say otherwise there is no way of escaping reality. As Mr. Kidd alerts Rose about the ultimate certainty:

MR KIDD (*rising*). I don't know what'll happen if you don't see him.

ROSE. I've told you I don't know this man!

MR KIDD. I know what he'll do. I know what he'll do. If you don't see him now, there'll be nothing else for it, he'll come up on his own bat, when your husband's here, that's what he'll do. He'll come up when Mr Hudd's here, when your husband is here.

ROSE. He'd never do that.

MR KIDD. He would do that. That's exactly what he'll do. You don't think he's going to go away without seeing you, after he's come all this way, do you?

You don't think that, do you? (Pinter, 121)

Rose is obviously defenceless like Kafka's burrowing creature and unable to protect herself from the onslaught of the outside world. The door opens finally and Riley, the blind Negro enters with the message "Come home, Sal" (Pinter, 124). Rose now

understands that her 'room' is now at serious risk. It is now going to be destroyed it is something she has built up all through her life. Riley's message is ultimately appears to Rose as the challenge to come out from her illusion. In fact Riley himself symbolizes the harsh reality. But facing reality is awfully grave for Rose, a person who bases her whole life on illusion. Now the final combat starts between reality and illusion:

RILEY. I want you to come home.

ROSE. No.

RILEY. With me.

ROSE. I can't. (Pinter, 124-125)

At the finale, Bert comes back home and notices Riley in the room. A few moments later he upsets the chair on which Riley is sitting and beats Riley savagely until he remains motionless and leaves the readers/audiences confused. "Can't see" Rose says clutching her eyes, "Can't see" (Pinter, 126). Her blindness represents a response to the weight of the unknown and the refusal to know the unknown at the same time. This blindness is one kind of evasion of self awareness which allows her to sustain her illusions by herself. And this blindness is probably one of Pinter's greatest exploration through which he stumbles on the psychological truth of mankind's obsession with ignorance.

In fact, Rose's illusion about 'a room' requires some explanations. Illusion is opposite to reality. Reality is something related to empirical experience. On the other hand, illusion refers to something that does not exist, or is different from reality or deceptive in

nature. As Behera points out the nature of illusion, “Philosophically, it refers to a man’s attempts at carving out a realm of eternity in this short transitory world and arresting time. It is an idyllic landscape of Arcadia, full of sweetness and bliss. It also encompasses our game and pastimes, day-dreams and various modes of diversion from the boredom and horror of existence” (3). C.G. Jung marks out that the origin of fantasy and illusion is an act of repression and agrees with Freud, “We imagine that which we lack” (quoted in Behera, 4). What worries Rose is total existence: the inner inadequacy as well as the external danger. She is also suffering from socio-psychological emptiness. Because she has centered her entire life in the ‘room no- seven’. She never comes out from this room and isolates herself from the outside world. Even she never remembers her past. She just thinks about her present life. She desperately tries to contain her inner inadequacy as well as the chaotic world outside by constructing a pattern of illusions and imposing it on herself as well as on others. Without taking the challenge of reality, she represses her mind to fulfill her wish. Freud traces this wish fulfillment as a stirring factor of illusion, “What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes. In this respect they come near to psychiatric delusion. In the case of delusions we emphasize as essential their being in contradiction with reality” (quoted in Behera, 3).

So Rose creates her ‘room’ in her own mind where she feels everything is very warm and nice. The ‘room’ becomes for her a nucleus of social and personal identity. This ‘room’ is the projection of her wish fulfillment, a compensation for the horrors of a chaotic existence, the projection of a self-image and a longing for security. Creating an illusionary world in this ‘room’ she wants to make a frame for regulating and managing

her chaotic life. Crossing the boundary of this room is nothing but 'murder'. As this 'room' is one kind of security operation, she has a fear of dispossession in her mind too. Her fear comes true and a succession of intruders' barge into her room. The first intruder is Mr. Kidd, the talkative landlord who claims the ownership of the room. The second intruder is the Sands couple, who comes to rent this 'room no seven'. The third one is Riley who mysteriously bids her to come home. Riley, the enigmatic character, seems to rise from the basement of the psyche. These serial invasions are menacing moves to invade her territory. The harsh truth disrupts her idealized image of herself which she has built. This idealized self is the outcome of her revulsion at her actual existence. At the end, her way of fleeing reality turns into life denying. She can't take the burden of reality.

Opened in the shabby post -World War II one-room flat in London, *The Room* represents a bleak view of human condition how people are at the mercy of their own existence, with little regard to their social class, economic circumstances or the particular slice of history they land in. *The Room* unfolds the rough terrain of a psychological landscape in which people are scared of being known and exposed and where people confine themselves shutting out the howling unknown. Among these hostilities 'a room' serves as a stopgap to sustain an illusionary secured existence.

With the evolution of dramatic artistry Pinter's 'a room' changes its function. Coming out of the question of existence 'a room' of his later plays focuses on individual needs and interests. Critics often remark that the walls of 'a room' become more solid than earlier plays. Even Pinter himself agrees that he has developed his style after *The Room*

(1957). 'A room' becomes more concrete to focus on a particular human situation concerning three particular people as it is seen in *The Caretaker* (1959). The next chapter will focus on the new look of 'a room' in *The caretaker*, where the function of 'a room' is centered towards privacy and personal security.

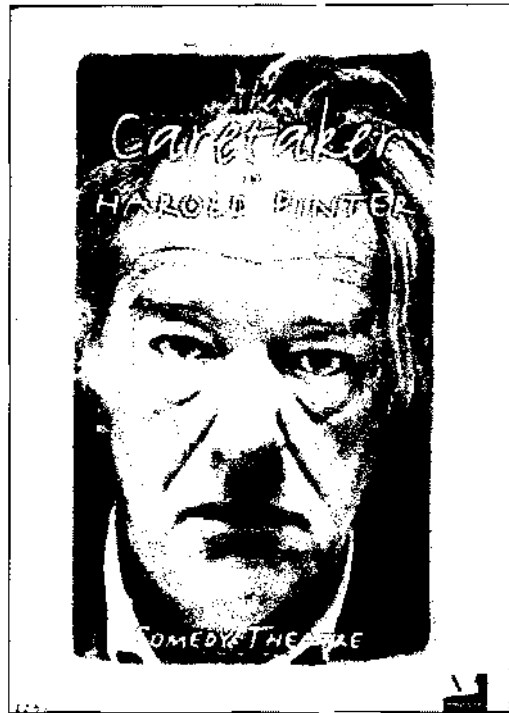
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## Chapter Two

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### *The Caretaker: A Room of One's Own*



## ***The Caretaker: A Room of One's Own***

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The use of 'a room' in *The Caretaker* is dealing with a new context where individuality and isolation become the basic questions. *The Caretaker* is an anti-utopian play which presents an uncomfortable world through the bizarre window of absurdity where people are unable to develop meaningful relationships because of their innate pride and selfishness. This failure results in the inevitable isolation of human beings as Naismith comments in his *A Faber Critical Guide: Harold Pinter*, "*The Caretaker* might be seen as presenting a very bleak vision of the isolation of mid-century urban man" (125). This isolation is not imposed on people; rather, Pinter perceives this isolation is vital human behavior to avoid communication with the outside world. So people concentrate on their own privacy and interests. When they feel that their private space is interfered somehow, they become busy in power struggle through language, motion, noise and silence. The three characters in *The Caretaker* project such vulnerability of the human condition where people are "defending themselves against intrusion or their own impulses by entrenching themselves in a reduced and controlled existence" (The Swedish Academy Citation, 2005). And like most other plays, the game of defence is happened in 'a room'.

In fact, the meaning of 'a room' as a setting depends on how it serves its purpose. And the purpose is varied according to the demand and interest of the user(s). In the play *The Caretaker*, the three characters – Davies, Aston and Mick value the room in the way they perceive their existence and relate this existence to the 'room'. When their different demands and interests confront each other, the environment turns into a mess. The characters ultimately fail to develop a relationship.

The play takes place in an upstairs room in a derelict house in West London. Mick, a man in his late twenties is found alone in the room. In Act One he slowly looks at the objects around him. When he hears a door bang downstairs and muffled voices, he quits the room silently. The room remains empty for a short time. Few moments later Aston enters, a man in his early thirties and Davies, an old tramp. What the relation among these three does not become clear at the beginning. Later, we learn that Mick and Aston are brothers and Aston is in charge of the house but resides in this single room. Aston rescues Davies from a fight in the café and welcomes him to his room. The relationship which is projected here is not at all harmonious. All three characters are busy with their own comfort and individuality through the occupancy of the room.

For a man like Davies the 'room' is a secured identity. He is a rootless drifter, a man who never dreams about settling in a homely atmosphere. Mick comments on Davies' identity in Act Two, "... You remind me of my uncle's brother. He was always on move, that man. Never without his passport" (Pinter, 31). In his own comments Davies figures his own life thus, "... I haven't had a good sit down ... I haven't had a proper sit down ... well, I couldn't tell you ..." (Pinter, Act One, 7). So getting the offer of staying in the house from Aston is a great opportunity for him. He says to Aston in Act One, "Anyway, I'm obliged to you, letting me ... letting me have a bit of arrest, like ... for a few minutes" (Pinter, 11). But as he is a man bereft of any social contact all through his life, he is unable to practice minimum social values. For his survival he has had to struggle at every step of his life. The pattern of his life has made him selfish and to extract benefits

only. He demands more facilities after getting permission for staying in the room. He starts nosing in household matters:

DAVIES. This is your house then, is it?

ASTON. I'm in charge.

DAVIES. You the landlord, are you?

*He puts a pipe in his mouth and puffs without lighting it.*

Yes, I noticed them heavy curtains pulled across next door as we come along. I noticed them heavy big curtains right across the window down there. I thought there must be someone living.

ASTON. Family of Indians live there.

DAVIES. Blacks?

ASTON. I don't see much of them.

DAVIES. Blacks, eh? (*Davies stands and moves about.*) Well you've got some knick-knacks here all right, I'll say that, I don't like a bare room.

(Pinter, Act One, 13)

Davies is the choosy type. Sometimes he tries to prove himself respectable and assert his in social ranking. He claims, "I've eaten my dinner off the best of plates" (Pinter, Act One, 9). But ultimately he proves to be worthy only of laughter and pity, as when he asks Aston, "... you haven't got a spare pair of shoes?" (Pinter, Act One, 13). Aston gives him a pair of shoes and tells Davies to try to put it on. Davies waggles his feet to fit the shoes but can't. He comments, "These are too pointed, you see" (Pinter, 16). In fact, his trying to fit the shoes suggests his trying to adjust to the new environment. But he is always

failed to adjust in any situation. His hatred for Greeks, Blacks, Poles and the 'alien people' is for his inability to establish a true living relationship with people around him and to meet the claims of life. As he points out, "All them Blacks had it, Blacks, Greeks, Poles, the lot of them, that's what, doing me out of a seat, treating me like dirt" (Pinter, Act One, 8). When Davies gets permission to stay in the room, he tries to show himself to be a man of nobility, "... You're sure now, you're sure you don't mind me staying here? I mean, I'm not the sort of a man who wants to take any liberties" (Pinter, Act One, 27). But whatever he says is full of lies like his assumed names. So Mick challenges him, "... I can turn you to the police station in five minutes, have you in for trespassing, loitering with intent, daylight robbery, filching, thieving and stinking the place out" (Pinter, Act Two, 36). As he finds Mick more proactive than Aston, he starts complaining against Aston. In fact, Davies's long-suppressed desire for power surfaces when he finds Mick and Aston. He, who has been dominated all through his life, now starts dominating the brothers. But ultimately the brothers conclude that he is him a real threat to their privacy. Mick takes the control of the room saying, "You're an old skate. You don't belong in a nice place like this. You're an old barbarian" (Pinter, Act Two, 35). Behera observes:

This power motive is basically an assertion of ability, security and independence. The suppression of the basic desire for power leads to a feeling of inferiority and incompetence which demands compensation in the form of "maximization of ego-consciousness". This inflated ego is an illusion which is eventually shattered in the face of actualities. Davies in *The Caretaker* inflates his ego to neutralize his sense of insignificance but his ego then threatens Mick and Aston, who throw him out (52).

So Paradise is lost and Davies is subjected to leave the 'room'.

The two brothers value the 'room' in their own way. They are busy fencing off their areas from the bewildering chaos outside and the 'debris' inside. They have no problem with the identity like Davies. But they lack harmony for which people live together under the same roof. There is an underlying interpersonal tension between the two, but at the same time, a mutual recognition, though not appreciation, of each other's dreams. To them, the room is a place for privacy and individual dreams. Aston always nourished a dream of repairing the house but never could get used to doing so:

Once I get that shed up outside ... I'll be able to give a bit more thought to the flat, you see. Perhaps I can knock up one or two things for it. (*He walks to the window.*) I can work with my hands, you see. That's one thing I can do. I never knew I could. But I can do all sorts of things now, with my hands. You know, manual things. When I get that shed up out there ... I'll have a workshop, you see. I ... could do a bit of woodwork. Simple woodwork, to start. Working with ... good wood (Pinter, Act Two, 40).

He has assembled many things over the years, "*a small cupboard, paint buckets, boxes containing nuts, screws ... a statue of Buddha. Down right, a fireplace ...*" (Pinter, 6) with the hope of arranging them in order. But those things are completely unused.

Mick too lives with a hope of reconstructing the house into a penthouse. He says To Davies:

I could turn this place into a penthouse. For instance ... this room. This room you could have as the kitchen. Right size, nice window, sun comes in. I'd have ... it wouldn't be flat it'd be a palace (Pinter, Act Three, 60).

The fact is that, whether they will be able to fulfill their individual wish or not, they keep hoping. But when they find an outsider nosing about their flat, their dreams face a challenge. Aston gives Davies shelter. But he finds Davies an ever demanding character. Davies, for his part, often tries to exercise power over Aston as soon he discovers that Aston has had some psychological treatment earlier. Again, Mick finds Davies's exploration of the room in the absence of Aston as interference and asks Davies, "What's the game?" (Pinter, Act One, 29). When Davies tries to show reason on his staying in the room, Mick refuses his explanation and says, "I'm afraid you're a born fibber, en't you? You're speaking to the owner. This is my room. You're standing in my house" (Pinter, Act Two, 34).

The act of offering Davies the job of caretaking the house may be considered as a way of establishing a relationship. The intricate relationships among Mick, Aston and Davies reflect their desperate attempts at investing their chaotic world with a meaningful form. But they fail to form a meaningful relationship. The serenity of the room is dealt a fatal blow with the smashing the statue of Buddha. The irony is that the room which was is symbol of warm and peace, ultimately turns into an excruciating hell.

The play begins with lonely Mick in the room. Again, Aston is found alone in Act Two, when he delivers a long speech about his nightmarish experience in mental hospital. The play also ends with Aston remaining alone in silence. The only thing remains is the inevitable isolation.

In fact, *The Caretaker* represents crude version of the modern world where sense of togetherness is a vague idea. This play gives us a bitter commentary on particular human condition where in one hand, a man like Davies is tortured like stray cats and on the other hand, people like Aston or Mick live on their own separate world.

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## **Conclusion**

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## **Conclusion**

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Harold Pinter is no more an unknown name to the readers of literary world. He is now considered as a classic playwright and dramatist. For more than forty years English theatre has been gifted by his brilliant, arresting and challenging plays. Pinter possesses the talent of rousing expectation among the readers/audience which many *avant-grade* writers lack in their writings. Humour, violence, characters and atmosphere all of which Pinter has, are not enough to consider Pinter as today's Harold Pinter. A view of life, an individual world is needed. Pinter successfully provides them in his plays.

In his plays, "Instead of providing rational justifications for action, Pinter offers glimpses of bizarre or terrible moments of people's lives" (Zaman, unnumbered). Unlike traditional playwrights, Pinter focuses on uncertain moments or situations of human lives where past and future have no function. Only the present dominates the total atmosphere of the stage. And the readers/audiences observe how people react or approach to the present uncertainty. It is important to note that Pinter is influenced by 'existentialism' – a philosophic view of the human condition that was popular in the 1950's and 1960's. His characters are found at the edge of their living and longing desperately to sustain their existence in a purposeless universe. Thus, the question of rationality/ irrationality becomes invaluable. To project such ambiguous human condition Pinter uses 'a room' as an effective setting in his plays.

The 'room' in Pinter's plays offers more than mere stage setting. This 'room' works as a peep-hole through which the readers/audiences are supposed to look at a different

world, to some realities are traditionally overlooked. The readers/audiences have no other option to see on right or left. The 'room' puts a big question mark within which puzzles of reality and the condition of human existence are inextricably intertwined. In the case of *The Room*, the 'room' serves as a psychological battlefield where fear of insecurity, sense of dispossession forces Rose to face reality. In *The Caretaker*, the occupation of 'room' is contested among Davies, Aston and Mick, because all of them want to exercise personal power. The 'room' fails to bring the three characters under an agreement of meaningful relationship. Thus isolation results as a matter of consequence.

The 'room' as things turns out, isn't just the setting. Nobel Laureate Pinter's originality lies in the 'room' as a psychological space within which human beings are enclosed along with thousands of qualms of life.

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## **Pictures:**

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