



FEAR AND DEATH IN HAROLD PINTER'S PLAY "THE ROOM"

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Abstract

Harold Pinter's early play, **The Room**, begins with fear and ends with the death. The cause of fear and death remains a mystery through the play. Between fear and death a lot of things happen which help to develop the plot of the play. The main protagonists of the play, Rose and her husband, Bert are the victims of fear of some unknown dangers. The difference between the wife and the husband is that Rose keeps on expressing her fear continuously by speaking a lot whereas her husband, Bert hides his fear by composing himself cool and keeping silent all the time. In this paper we propose to analyze the play in the context of fear, death, alienation and mystery. Our study will be completely a textual study based on the close reading and visualizing of the play.

Keywords: Alienation, danger, death, fear, mystery.

Harold Pinter was one of the greatest dramatists who gave a new dimension to English drama by creating dramatic poetry out of everyday speech. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2005. In his award ceremony speech the chairman of the Swedish Academy, Horace Engdahl paid tribute to Pinter's talent by saying that Pinter was an artist "who in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and focuses entry into the oppression's closed room". Accepting the everlasting impact of Pinter's plays, the editor of the Biogrphy.com has remarked that " Pinter's work has inspired and informed generations of playwrights, especially Tom Stoppard and David Mamet. Pinter's plays are still performed around the world, with new audiences experiencing the distinct, strange and foreboding atmosphere so often





created by the late writer".(www.biography.com/people/harold_pinter-9491163). Paying a tribute to Harold Pinter, David Hare points out that;

Pinter did what Auden said a poet should do. He cleaned the gutters of English language, so that it ever afterwards flowed more easily and more clearly. We can also say that over his work and over his person hovers a sort of leonine, predatory spirit which is all the more powerful for being held under in a rigid discipline of form, or in a black suit...The essence of his singular appeal is that you sit down to every play he writes in certain expectation of the unexpected. In sum, this tribute from one writer to another; you never know what the hell's coming next. (David Hare in Harold Pinter: A Celebration, p.21)

Since his schooldays Pinter was inclined towards literature. He acted in many of school plays directed by his school teacher with whom he was greatly influenced. They used to walk a long discussing literature. At this time he also wrote poetry which was published in school magazine. Later on Pinter joined repertory companies as an actor playing many roles and toured Ireland and England with those repertory companies. To support his income, besides acting he also did a lot of odd jobs. But it was not enough. He was born to do more. The destiny had made him for drama. He wanted to write dram but he did not find opportunity. The opportunity was provided by his friend, Henry Woolf in 1957 which proved to be a turning point in Pinter's career. Michael Billington has aptly commented on this opportunity in a review in The guardian:

The turning point came in 1957 when one of Pinter's old Hackney friends, Henry Woolf, asked him to write a play for Bristol University's recently established drama department. The result was **The Room**, and reveals Pinter staking out his territory from the start. The play shows an anxious recluse resisting the insidious pressure of the outside world, and artfully blends comedy and menace.([www.the guardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), 2008).





Pinter's first play, **The Room** was written and first produced in 1957 by The Drama Department of the Bristol University. The production was so successful that the Bristol Old Vice Company also produced it and entered it in The Sunday Time's student drama competition. Praising the play, Harold Hobson, a drama critic, wrote in The Sunday Times that the play, **The Room** "is a brief excursion, in a slum room, into the nightmare world of insecurity and uncertainty. It has a touch of Ionesco and echoes of Beckett, and somewhere not far distant is the disturbing ghost of that Henry James who turned the screw..."(The Sunday Times, January,1958).

Before we proceed it will be appropriate to summarize the story of the play in a nut shell.

The story of the play is about a 60 years old housewife, Rose and her 50 years old husband, Bert who is a lorry driver. The setting of the play indicates that they belong to the poor class of the society. They have come from an unknown place and are now living in a rented room of a big house. The play opens with Rose serving evening snacks to her husband who is about to go outside to drive his lorry. While taking care of household, Rose keeps talking to her husband without getting any response from him as if he is a dumb which he is not as we come to know in the end of the play. Rose seems to be very happy with her life and with the place where they are living. She frequently talks about the safety inside the room and danger outside the room. Meanwhile they are interrupted by the land lord of the house, Mr. Kidd who enters the room. Rose and Mr. Kidd indulge into a long futile and confusing conversation while Bert remains mute. It seems that the landlord has come to Rose with a purpose which he can not disclose in front of Bert. When the landlord leaves, Rose helps Bert in wearing coat and instructs him how to protect him from the cold outside. She takes great care of her husband because he is ill as we come to know later in the play.

When Bert leaves the room, Rose opens the door to throw the garbage. She finds Mrs. and Mr. Sands, a young couple , standing confused at the door. They are looking for the land lord to rent a room in the house. Out of courtesy Rose invites them into the room. Mrs. and Mr. Sands indulge into a conversation which is full of comedy. But they also inform Rose about a man in





the basement whom they could not see because of darkness in the basement but only heard his voice telling them that the room number 7 is vacant in the house. This alarms Rose because number 7 is her room. So, she strongly reacts and tells them that this room is occupied. As soon as the couple leaves the room the land lord again comes to Rose and informs her about the presence of a man in the basement who wants to meet Rose. She apprehends a danger and so she refuses to meet him. The land lord tells Rose that the man in the basement has been waiting for a week and he may create a problem for him. So, he requests her to meet him. Anyhow, Rose agrees to meet him on the condition that the meeting should be very short and he must leave the room before her husband returns. The man enters the room. He is a blind Negro. It seems that he knows Rose very well. But Rose refuses to know him. The blind Negro gives Rose a message from her father to return home. While Rose is trying to touch the face and teeth of the blind Negro like a blind woman, her husband enters the room and without paying any attention towards the blind man, he romantically and sensuously speaks about his lorry as if it was a woman. Suddenly he gets up and hits the blind Negro and kills him. With the killing of the blind Negro, Rose too goes blind as she says, "I can 't see, I can 't see,". Thus the play abruptly ends on a tragic note.

If we critically analyze the story of the play, we find that fear dominates the plot. Since the opening of the play Rose is afraid of the "cold" outside the room which symbolizes the insecurity of life outside the room. Rose's repetition of "**It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder.**" (Harold Pinter, **The Room**, Published by Chris Smith, www.scribd.com, p.91) symbolizes the insecurity prevailed in the society. She feels secured inside the room as she affirms "**....this room's all right for me. I mean, you know where you are. When it's cold, for instance.**" (**The Room**, p.92). The apparent main source of fear in the play is the visitors who belong to the real world. Since the very opening of the play, Rose is afraid of the intruders. In fact, to hide her fear, she has created a safe illusionary world around her and she will not permit anyone to enter and destroy that illusionary world where she feels safe and secured:





If they ever ask you, Bert, I'm quite happy where I am. We're quiet, 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.(The Room)

But at the same time, she is apprehensive of the danger in the form of intruders. That is why she is continuously worried about the question who is living in the basement:

I don't know how they live there.It's asking for trouble....I've never seen who is it? Who lives down there? I'll have to ask. I mean, you might as well know, Bert. But whoever it is, it can't be too cosy. I think it's changed hands since I was last there. I didn't see who moved in then. I mean the first time it was taken. Anyhow, I think they've gone now. But I think someone else has gone in now....I don't know who lives down there now
(The Room, pp-91-93)

Even the slight happenings and any news from the outside world makes Rose apprehensive of a danger. Every intruder into her room disturbs her. The first danger comes in the form of the land lord of the house, Mr. Kidd, an old man. His coming into the room reminds her the presence of someone in the basement. She apprehends the coming danger for her secured life. The second intruder is in the form of Mrs. and Mr. Sands, a young married couple, who tell her that someone in the basement informed them that this room is vacant. Mr. Sands tells her that, **"The man in the basement said there was one. One room. Number seven he said"**. This disturbs Rose a lot and she vigorously objects by saying that **"That's this room"**, and **"This room is occupied."** (The Room,p.108). She realizes that someone wants her to go out from her safe and secured house. The third intruder is the blind Negro who gives a message to Rose from her





father to return home. This third intruder proves fatal for her because he destroys her safe castle completely.

But the reasons of her fear is not clearly known till the end of the play. In an interview Pinter also expressed his ignorance of the causes of fear, "But of what exactly they are afraid, we never learn: we feel an unspecified menace."(Interview by Tynan, British Broadcasting Corporation Home Service, October 28, 1960,quoted in Esslin, **The Theatre of the Absurd,p.199**) We can only apprehend the causes of her fear of the outer world. The first apprehension is that she and her so called husband may be involved in some criminal activities in their past lives and now they are on run from the police and have taken shelter in a lonely place. That may also be the reason of Rose preference of living alone and not meeting the other people in the locality. As she tells Mrs. Sands, "**We're very quiet. We keep ourselves to ourselves. I never interfere. I mean, why should I? We've got our room. We don't bother anyone else. That's the way it should be**".(**The Room,p.105**). The second reason may be that Rose may be in a bad profession , say prostitution, where she got bad treatment and has fled from there with her so called younger than her husband and does not want to go into her past profession. Bert may not be her husband but a lover in the past. Now Rose is afraid that someone from her old place will come and take her back into that dirty profession by force, as we know that in real world the people who manages this profession , are very strong. Once a girl trapped there , never gets freedom for the whole life. That is why Rose keeps herself confined to the small room and keeps herself aloof from the real world.

Rose pretends to be happy in the room as her world with her dull and mute husband. But the appearance of the blind Negro reminds her the reality of her existence. As Wellwarth, a drama critic puts it: "The Negro may symbolize death, the woman's past, or some hidden guilt complex---probably the latter, since she is struck blind when her husband beats the Negro. But there is no hint as to what his function really is nor as to why the husband beats him so savagely. He is simply an emissary from the outside who has succeeded in breaking into the





circle of light. As a result , the womb is broken, and the dwellers are cast out from the light into the darkness". (Wellwarth, **The Theatre of Protest and Paradox, p.200**). The blind Negro reminds Rose of her past life when she may be a prostitute. She does not want to look back into her past life. So, she has confined herself into a small room. She also refuses to recognize the blind man and speaks bitterly with him as if she is very much angry with him. On the contrary the blind Negro is very polite and silently listens to her bitter speech as if someone tries to please his dear ones:

Riley: Thank you.

Rose: Don't thank me for anything. I don't want you up here.

Idon't know who you are. And the sooner you get out the

Better.

Pause

(Rising.) Well, come on. Enough's enough. You can take a

Liberty too far, you know. What do you want? You force

your way up here. You disturb my evening. You come in

and sit down here. What do you want?

He looks about the room.

What are you looking at? You're blind, aren't you? So what

are you looking at? What do you think you've got here, a

little girl? I can keep up with you. I'm one ahead of people

like you. Tell me what you want and get out.





(The Room, p-112).

But when the blind Negro tells his name, Rose is exposed and we come to know that she knows him but is hiding the fact and telling lies. When he tells his name she is surprised and says that it is not his name. Her reaction proves that she knows him:

Riley: My name is Riley.

Rose: I don't care if it's----What? That's not your name. That's

not your name. you've got a grown up woman in this room,

do you hear? Or are you deaf too? You' re not deaf too, are

You? You're all deaf and dumb and blind, the lot of you,

a bunch of cripples.(The Room,pp.112-113).

On the other hand, Bert, her husband, also does not want anybody to remind Rose of her past life. So, when he sees Riley, an outside contact, he knocks him and kills him. But the realization of the reality disturbs and takes Rose out of her delusion and so she becomes blind for her delusion where she feels secured and safe. Now the illusion is broken and so she can see only the reality of the life which is full of menace and insecurity. So, her words," I can't see, I can't see" in the end of the play symbolizes not seeing the happy life in illusion. Thus we see that Rose's happiness is the self convinced happiness on the part of Rose. As the play progresses, it becomes clear that she is, in fact, deluding herself. In the absence of her husband her subconscious mind starts to reveal itself, eventually climaxing at the point in which she realizes that she is not happy at all. The blind Negro is the dramatic embodiment of this realization. His presence in Rose's room is the catalyst for her husband, Bert's unexpected savage violence. As Bert strikes the blind man, Rose is simultaneously stuck blind. Bert tries to save Rose from the realization of the fact by killing the blind Negro, but it is too late. Rose is already destroyed by





this realization. She has no sense of who she really is. Hers is not a physical blindness rather it is a symbolical representation of the height of her distress and miseries.

In this play we find a good mingling of reality and symbolism. Here Pinter shows the absurdity of a man's situation through the mingling of reality and symbolism. The coziness and warmth inside the room and the darkness and coldness outside the room are symbols whereas racism and the violation of the human rights are the realities of our societies. The blind Negro in the room functions both as a classical oracle and as a culmination of the plays naturalism. His presence in the basement and later intrusion into Rose's room suggest a racially charged atmosphere where black skin symbolizes darkness and danger. In this play the technique of contrast and juxtaposition has been used very tactfully by the dramatist to highlight the menace outside the room. Inside the room there are warmth, light and coziness whereas outside the room there are darkness and coldness. This contrast of the situation from inside the room to the outside the room enhances the intensity of the menace of the characters. Rose tries to hide her fear by constantly referring the coziness, comfort and safety inside the room and the darkness, coldness and the obscurity of the world outside the room. She is constantly afraid of being interfered by the outsiders. She comprehends, and rightly comprehends that the outside contact will bring miseries and will destroy her life. So, she feels secured and safe inside the room. Thus we see that in this play the room is overtly symbolical but the setting and characters are, for most part, realistic. In fact, we can say that in this play the dramatist has created a real situation in which we can see people's day to day real lives. We see these people as they really live in the society. Here Pinter is criticizing not the people but the society which makes them to live like this. They are being violent not because of their nature but because of the society has made them so. Their disbelieves their alienation, and their ignorance are also due to the indifferent view of the society towards them.

Thus we see that the main theme of the play, **The Room** is alienation. The atmosphere is menacing, the characters feel risk and insecure. Pinter explains the alienation theme in an





interview with Hallam Tennyson, “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 a very potent question: What is going to happen to these two people in the room? Is someone going to open the door and come in?” (An interview by Hallam Tennyson, British Broad Corporation General Overseas Service, August 7, 1960, quoted in Esslin, **The Theatre of the Absurd**, p. 199.) The tension is intensified by juxtaposition of security versus insecurity. The room itself is safe and secure, but outside the room , the unknown lurks , a void to be feared. The occupants are unaware of some of very basic information that makes them wary of what lies beyond the seemingly solid walls. For example they do not know what floor the room is on and even how many floors are in the house. They are alienated completely from everything beyond the room. This is clear from the following conversation between Rose and Mr.Kidd:

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.

Rose: Oh

Mr. Kidd: No, not now.

Rose: It must be a bit of job.

Mr. Kidd: Oh, I used to count them, once. Never got tired of it.

I used to keep a track on everything in this house. I

had a lot to keep my eyes on then. I was able for it





too. That was when my sister was alive. But I lost track a bit, after she died....I think my mum was a Jewess. Yes, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that She was a Jewess....

Rose: What about your sister, Mr. Kidd?

Mr. Kidd: What about her?

Rose: when did she die then, your sister? What did she die of?

Mr.Kidd: Who? (The Room,pp.98-98)

But Mr. Kidd does not answer because he does not remember anything about these questions asked by Rose. This lack of knowledge of outside world and lack of communication between the characters make their lives more pathetic. In fact the coming of landlord creates a lot of confusion which also increases the dimension of Rose's fear. In his review of the play, Kerry Reid has rightly observed that, "a visit from landlord, Mr. Kidd adds confusion rather than clarity—he claims to not know how many floors are in the house, while musing about his dead mother, who may have been "a Jewess" and his also deceased sister. He also tells Rose that her room used to be his"(www.Chicagotribune.com, October 5, 2016).

The other important issue which we cannot ignore while analyzing this play is the presence of mystery and suspense in the play. Since **The ROOM**, deals with the absurdist situation and behavior of the characters in the play , the elements of mystery and suspense are necessary. In fact mystery and vagueness is one of the main characteristic of the Absurd drama. In this play the dramatist has used the mystery and vagueness to show the mysterious nature and vagueness of the human life. Everything , in this play, from situation , action to events are





vague and mysterious. Even the characters are mysterious. We do not know anything about Rose and Bert. We also do not know about the past life of the land lord who is completely mysterious. The very building in which Rose and Bert are living is mysterious. Nobody knows how many floors or rooms are there in the house. Why the basement is dark and who lives there is unknown. Moreover, where the land lord of the house lives in the building is mysterious. Nobody knows in which room he lives now. Who his parents were, which faith of religion his mother followed and why his sister lived with him are un known. Even the main protagonists of the play, Rose and Bert are mysterious. Their past lives are not revealed at all. Who Rose is and what her profession was, who her father is, why they have taken shelter in a small room in an unknown place, why Rose is afraid of the outside world of the room, why she feels comfort inside the room, why Bert keeps silent till the end of the play, who the blind Negro is. All these are questions which are vague and have not been answered in the play. In fact Pinter wanted his audience to interpret and solve the mystery themselves. Harold Hobson has rightly observed that these “are questions that do not admit of precise solutions. They do not need to. The play makes one stir uneasily in one’s shoes, and doubt, for a moment, the comforting solidity of the earth.”(**The Sunday Times**, January1958.)

Our overall analysis of the play, **The Room**, shows that in this play the dramatist deals with the values of the societies which are of two types--- positive and negative values—which are shown by the means of the behavior of the characters in the play. The positive value is shown specially by Rose’s behavior. Her concern regarding the safety of herself and her husband inside the room, her constant reassurance that her husband is a good driver and nothing will happen while he is driving his old van outside, and her hospitality shown to Mrs. and Mr. Sands when she let them come inside the room so that they can warm up a little are the examples of positive values in the play. The negative values in the play has been shown by the means of Bert’s behavior . When he enters the room he find a negro sitting in his room. This brings a feeling of hatred in his heart against the black people. This is racism. The degree of aggressiveness is also a negative value. Without asking any question and without waiting for





any explanation from anyone he starts hitting Riley and kills him. Here Pinter shows a set of established values in the society which are the root cause of racism, violation and evils of the modern society. Thus we see that the dramatist shows the absurdity of the society by presenting absurd situation in this play. Although **The Room** is a small and Pinter's first play, it opened the ways for his later plays. Kerry Reid, in his review of the play, has rightly said that "**The Room** 'obviously points the direction for much of Pinter's later and best-known plays such as "**The Birthday Party**". "**The Homecoming**", and "**The Caretaker**" where "home" is never the same as "haven" and mysterious strangers bring portents of possible doom"(Kerry Reid in www.Chicagotribune.com,October 5,2016). In fact in **The Room** the image of death and its fear is constantly present throughout the play which is a constant preoccupation in the early plays of Harold Pinter.

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