

«Oppression's Closed Rooms»: Harold Pinter's drama

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British playwright Harold Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2005. The press release of the Swedish Academy stated that Pinter's plays «uncover the precipice under everyday prattle and force entry into oppression's closed rooms». The key word “oppression” clearly associates Pinter's drama with one of the oldest fields of human knowledge, that of politics. Taken in a general context, politics refers to the art of governing which is inevitably based on power relations. In the case of Pinter's drama, power leads to oppression and power games are played in closed rooms. In his long dramatic career which spanned half a century starting with the staging of *The Room* in 1957 and continuing until the playwright's death in 2008, Pinter had one thematic constant: oppression. He has an array of characters who are defeated in power games and become victims of either physical or psychological oppression.

Harold Pinter frequently acknowledged his debt to Samuel Beckett; for Pinter, he is the greatest writer of our time. Harold Bloom calls Pinter «the legitimate son of Beckett»¹. «It is fortunate that Beckett has proved to be inimitable», writes J. L. Styan². Due to such critical comments, Pinter is commonly known as a follower of Beckett and an absurdist dramatist. Yet, Pinter deviates significantly from Beckett and the absurdists. In fact, the dramatist detests classification. Saying «what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism», Pinter hints that angry theater and absurd theater may not be after all irreconcilable³. Distrusting «definitive labels», he insists that he «never started a play from any kind of abstract idea or theory and never envisaged [his] own characters as messengers of death, doom, heaven or the Milky Way or, in other words, as allegorical representations of any particular force, whatever that may mean»⁴. Pinter makes it clear that he does not have a philosophical ax to grind; in other words, he does not build his drama on any current philosophy of the absurd.

Recognizing Pinter's affinities to the absurdists, it can safely be said that in the contemporary theater Pinter's work is original in method and unique in its effect on the stage. According to Arnold Hinchliffe, Pinter is responsible for the assimilation of the Absurd Drama into the British way of life and this ability to fuse European Absurdity with the English way of life, the for-

eign with the native, the timeless and universal with the immediate and local, gives Pinter's plays a lasting quality. This assimilation is actually a reconciliation of surface naturalism with a sentiment of absurdity. Although Pinter moves away from realism in a narrow scope, he nevertheless makes use of realistic methods. The setting of Pinter's plays is well-defined; the décor is depicted in its minutest details. The audience knows where they are – a private territory which might as well be theirs. The surrealist elements, which the audience are confronted with in the plays by the European absurdists, are completely absent from Pinter's plays. With the corpse that keeps on growing in the bedroom, the mushrooms sprouting all over the house and the protagonist finally vanishing into the Milky Way, Ionesco's *Amédée* is very far removed from Pinter's realistic depiction of a married couple in *Landscape* – though in terms of sentiment the two plays do share a common ground. Likewise, Beckett's *Play*, in which three urns occupy the stage and the heads of wife, husband, and mistress – sticking out of those urns – conduct monologues and dialogues, is echoed by Pinter in *Silence* but in Pinter's case there is no shocking *poetic image* on the stage. As most absurdist plays fall within the symbolist tradition in terms of their imagery, Pinter's plays stand aloof from that plane of reference.

Another basic distinction between Pinter and the absurdists is emphasized by Walter Kerr, according to whom Pinter is the only playwright «who writes existentialist plays existentially»⁵. As existentialism at root reverses the ancient Platonic view that essence/idea precedes existence/form, insisting that existence precedes essence, it gives birth to the idea that «man does not come to the planet with an identity; he spends his time on the planet arriving at an identity»⁶. Many absurdist playwrights, incorporating existentialist themes into their plays, build their plays as Platonists; that is, they first form an abstract concept of man's nature and role, the essence, and then present it to us in its original conceptual form, individualizing only very slightly. In these plays «we are not concerned with persons forming themselves; we are concerned with persons inhabiting set forms they cannot escape»⁷.

Beckett, for instance, starts with the essence of man lonely, isolated, homeless, helpless and weak and then individualizes it with the help of effective images: he takes his curtain up upon a woman buried waist-deep in sand, three people in three urns, a couple confined to ashbins, the immobilized Didi and Gogo waiting under a tree. Thus, Beckett uses the Platonic sequence: he imposes upon the audience a concept which precedes the kind of existence that is presented on the stage. Such is the pattern of all absurdist playwrights. Harold Pinter, however, in line with his personal assertion that he doesn't conceptualize in any way, is unique in his transformation of the existentialist sequence (first comes existence, then essence) onto the stage. Pinter's plays concentrate on the exploratory movement in the void,

without the playwright's preconception. As to the formation of the concept or the essence, it is the job of the audience to derive it from the concrete existence presented on the stage.

Pinter's drama revolves around the theme of man's existential fear which the dramatist approaches not as an abstraction but as something concrete, real, and familiar. Harold Bloom, taking a comment Pinter made about Shakespeare, substitutes Pinter for Shakespeare: «Pinter writes of the open wound and through him, we know it open and know it closed. We tell when it ceases to beat, and tell it at its highest peak of fever»⁸. However, Bloom says, Pinter cannot close any wound whatsoever⁹. As a Jewish dramatist writing in the post-World War II era, Pinter is obsessed with the open wound lying in the heart of humanity: a horror of violence, cruelty, oppression, alienation and isolation in a world governed by power games. Despite Bloom's efforts to find implicit in the world of Pinter's dramas the normative values of the Jewish tradition, the audience comes out of Pinter's plays with the final sense that our cosmos is the *kenoma* of the Gnostics. Such is the cosmos of Beckett's plays – an emptiness into which we have been thrown after a catastrophe-creation. In Pinter's vision there is no light.

Unable to inject a remedy to the individual's plight in our irrational universe, Pinter ends many plays with the hopeless, broken down individuals blinded or immobilized. Oppressed within their closed rooms, they are totally helpless. There is absolutely nothing to be done:

Stanley's body shudders, relaxes, his head drops, he becomes still again, stooped¹⁰.

Rose – Can't see. I can't see. I can't see. (Rose stands clutching her eyes)¹¹.

Gus stops, body stooping, his arms at his sides¹².

Flora crosses to the blinded Edward with the tray of matches, and puts it in his hands¹³.

Lamb in chair. He sits still, staring, as in a catatonic trance¹⁴.

Disson in the chair, still, his eyes open¹⁵.

Pinter calls himself a traditional playwright for writing curtain lines. It is impossible not to catch the irony in Pinter's statement which is not to be taken seriously because Pinter's curtain lines never offer a resolution or an ending to the plays. As Pinter says, «A play is not an essay, nor should a playwright under any exhortation damage the consistency of his characters by injecting a remedy or apology for their actions into the last act, simply because we

have been brought up to expect, rain or sunshine, the last act “resolution”. To supply an explicit moral tag to an evolving and compulsive dramatic image seems to be facile, impertinent and dishonest»¹⁶.

Instead of a resolution, Pinter’s plays end with the understanding of the audience that there is no future for the characters. The curtain lines imply a terrible state of stasis which promises putrefaction – if not continued stagnation – for the characters concerned. Their visions and their hopes, which are proven to be beyond their grasps, are betrayed in such a way that future is completely eliminated from Pinter’s plays. Bernard Dukore draws attention to Pinter’s plays as conforming to the cardinal characteristics of modern tragicomedy. Pinter’s distinctive tragicomedies «not only begin in a comic manner and then reach a point where laughter stops, but from that point on, the sources of the noncomic are the same as those of the comic, and they deny the comic qualities they have established»¹⁷.

Pinter, while assimilating European absurdity to the British way of life has largely leaned on the European realist tradition. First of all, his revolutionary introduction of realistic English language to the English stage made such a great impact that a term like *Pinteresque language* has found a place in current dramatic criticism. In *Language and Silence*, Esslin cites the most obvious features of Pinter’s use of language: recurrent tautologies and repetitions, which are employed by the dramatist as the linguistic devices of the realistic tradition. The ancient art of rhetoric with its clear and well proportioned stage dialogue even persisted in naturalistic drama, in plays by Ibsen or Shaw. What Pinter did to stage language was to purify it from all art and infuse it with illogicalities, repetitions, tautologies, verbal absurdities, and nonsensicalities that abound in every-day language. Pinter’s *language of non-communication* has its roots in Strindberg and Wedekind, who created characters that talked past each other rather than to each other. As to the oblique dialogue in which the text hints at a hidden subtext, it was brought in by Chekhov¹⁸. Pinter’s trained audience know that in order to comprehend the characters, they need to focus on the subtext, the Freudian slips, and compulsive repetitions, for these are the things that give the characters away. Pinter’s realistic language is associative rather than logical for association is the principle of spoken language. Cloaked under the apparent absurdity of a Pinteresque dialogue, there is a high degree of realism:

MEG: Is Stanley up yet?

PETEY: I don’t know. Is he?

MEG: I don’t know. I haven’t seen him down yet.

PETEY: Well then, he can’t be up.

MEG: Haven’t you seen him down?

PETEY: I’ve only just come in.

MEG: He must be still asleep. What time did you go out this morning, Petey?

PETEY: Same time as usual.

MEG: Was it dark?

PETEY: No, it was light.

MEG: But sometimes you go out in the morning and it's dark.

PETEY: That's in the winter.

MEG: Oh, in winter.

PETEY: Yes, it gets light later in winter.

MEG: Oh¹⁹.

Guido Almansi calls Pinter a maestro in orchestrating not small but minute talk: the almost unnoticeable curves in an evasive conversation²⁰. Pinteresque dialogue merges into dramatic action in Pinter's drama. In the early plays, Pinter's fresh realism lies in his famous depiction of the phonetic stammerer as reflecting his conceptual stammering into phonetics. In the later plays, the treatment of inarticulacy disappears and leaves its place to two new mannerisms: the mannerism of the hard-of-hearing and the mannerism of the hard-of-understanding:

ROBERT: I thought you knew.

JERRY: Knew what?

ROBERT: That I knew. That I've known for years. I thought you knew.

JERRY: You thought I knew?²¹

Pinter's language functions as a veil that hides the truth locked beneath it. It is a language of insincerity and deceit. In Almansi's words, Pinter has «never stooped to use the degraded language of honesty, sincerity, or innocence which has contaminated the theatre for so long»²². In his early plays, Pinter's language covers up a contemporary form of terror exploited by the dramatist. It is a sort of *angst* on a personal level. In his later plays, through language past merges into present. Harold Pinter wrote plays for about fifty years. He established his uniqueness, earned worldwide acclaim and ultimately received a Nobel Prize for the powerful effect of his drama. With its affinities to realism and the absurd, his drama is unique as to defy categorization. The emergence of such terms as Pinteresque dialogue, Pinteresque silence and Pinteresque curtain lines points at the stylistic and linguistic originality of the dramatist. Like his characters, Pinter as playwright is evasive; he is known for withholding a great deal of information from his audience. Disguising things within one's chest is a general rule that one breaks at one's peril in Pinter's plays. As Peter Hall, Pinter's most responsive stage director says: «To shout is a weakness. You have to contain everything»²³. Pinter does not shout at his audience; he is a contemporary playwright who writes

obliquely in the post-modernist tradition, refusing all conciliatory blandishments of his audiences. As the death of the author in our post-modernist era has given rise to the birth of the reader, Pinter's drama has initiated the birth of the audience. Like conceptual art, what is foregrounded in Pinter's work is the audience's reaction to it. Pinter allows his reader/audience to think, get puzzled, and struggle with his own emotional and intellectual incompetence in the process of comprehending whatever is offered to him.

The title of an early play, *The Room*, is probably the most frequently used word in all Pinter criticism. The room constitutes the germ of Pinter's drama. In one of his rare interviews, published in "The Twentieth Century", the playwright said:

I certainly don't write from any kind of abstract idea. And I wouldn't know a symbol if I saw one. The germ of my plays? I'll be as accurate as I can about that. I went into a room and saw one person standing up and one person sitting down, and a few weeks later I wrote *The Room*. I went into another room and saw two people sitting down, and a few years later I wrote *The Birthday Party*. I looked through a door into a third room, and saw two people standing up and I wrote *The Caretaker*²⁴.

The evasive nature of Pinter's remarks concerning the thematic germ of his plays, coupled with his rejection of the traditional notion of definitive statements and of definitive dramatic language, forms the core of the problematics in Pinter criticism. Yet, Pinter's attachment to that particular constant in his plays, the presence of the room, has led critics to treat the room as the central symbol or metaphor of Pinter's art, despite the playwright's own aversion of such terms. According to Susan Rusinko, «Pinter's rooms are metaphors for the psychological rooms that his characters have built for themselves»²⁵. James R. Hollis says that the room is «suggestive of the encapsulated environment of modern man»²⁶. Hedwig Bock regards the room as the key symbol in Pinter's plays, which «either as room, garden, house or van, gives warmth and protection against a threatening world, but is a prison and a threat in itself»²⁷. Jak Deleon equates the room with a pseudo-womb, a warm and well-lit area in the middle of the dark and hostile ocean of existence»²⁸. The room is surely a recurring Pinteresque image of great significance: marking a confined place belonging to one or more people, the room – separated from the outside world, from the society by a certain door – becomes the setting of almost all Pinter plays. As Bock points out, although Pinter gives the impression that society is completely excluded from his plays – most of his characters are borderline cases who do not conform to any norm set by society – we nonetheless know that there is a society functioning outside Pinter's "rooms", and one of the main themes of Pinter's plays is the threat of the intruder from the outside, from society²⁹. Thus, entrance(s) to and ex-

it(s) from the room are of vital importance for the situational difference between the before and the after of an entrance is often so drastic and shocking that it constitutes the structural and thematic core around which the play revolves. The change that occurs as a result of the intrusion from the outside into the room is the focal point of a Pinter play. Pinter's preoccupation with well-defined boundaries within which individuals confine themselves seems to go hand in hand with that fierce insistence on privacy – a hallmark of Pinteresque characters. The outside, as a source of some unknown menace, is not so much of an objective phenomenon as an external projection of an internal fear of attack, annihilation or imprisonment. According to some critics like Harold Bloom and Martin Esslin, Pinter's art has some undefined relation to the Holocaust and the horror of violence, of inevitable harm embodied in outside forces has its roots in the dramatist's Jewish descent.

The Room (1957), Pinter's first play, is about two people in a room. Apart from the introduction of the room as a central image in Pinteresque drama, the play also incorporates several typical stylistic and linguistic elements which are to abound in Pinter's later plays. Rose and Bert Hudd are a middle-aged couple living in a shabby room in a large house. The play opens with Rose fussing over her husband, a van driver, who does not speak to her. Rose's monologue is on the virtues of the room they live in. Her constant references to the warmth and cosiness of the room in sharp contrast to the cold wintry weather outside are significant for they help to build the image of the room as a protective womb. Rose's obsession with the security of their room where no one bothers them is telling of her own identification with the room: the room, the all-important for Rose, is the only thing or place which truly belongs to her. It may be a shell or a womb, but whichever is the case, Rose is surely willing to remain in it to preserve the status-quo. Rose's aversion to the basement, dark and damp, is an extension of her fear of everything that lies outside of the room. Interestingly enough, however, her fear is coupled with her curiosity of the outside world. Peeping through the curtains and putting her ear to the door, Rose exhibits a fusion of fear and desire of the external world. If the room is the protective womb, then the embryo rejects the traumatic experience of birth fearing that menace is the ultimate principle of life, while at the same time it is curious to know what the outside world is like. Rose's repeated remarks about her happiness and comfort are to be taken as her attempt at disguising her fear of losing the security of the room, her fear of an alien world. Rose needs Bert to respond to her with understanding, comfort and love but Bert is silent throughout. This is Rose's struggle:

If they ever ask you, Bert, 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... 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 would be no good... I wonder who has got it now. I've never seen them, or heard of them. But I think someone's down there³⁰.

The Room contains more than one intrusion into Rose's house. The first intruder is Mr. Kidd, the landlord, who arrives, talks but does not communicate. The dialogue between Rose and Mr. Kidd is typically Pinteresque and it is to be linguistically reworked on in many other later plays by the dramatist:

ROSE: It must get a bit damp downstairs.
 MR. KIDD: Not as bad as upstairs.
 ROSE: What about downstairs?
 MR. KIDD: Eh?
 ROSE: What about downstairs?
 MR. KIDD: What about it?
 ROSE: Must get a bit damp.
 MR. KIDD: A bit. Not as bad as upstairs though.

This conversation, like several others in the play, does not point at the failure to communicate but at the intentional refusal to communicate. Pinter seems to be keen on the distinction which is of vital importance in his art. In a speech he delivered at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol in 1962, Pinter said: «We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase: "failure of communication"... and this phrase has been fixed to my work quite consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility»³¹. Mr. Kidd does not disclose any information about himself, his heritage or his past. All he says is so vague, strange and contradictory that Rose is left completely perplexed and confused. The second intrusion into the room is by a young married couple, Mr. and Mrs. Sands, who are looking for a room in the house. Introducing verbal comedy to the play, the episode of this second intrusion heightens the fear and suspense as Rose learns that a man sitting in the dark basement has told the couple that Room Seven, Rose's room is vacant. Mr. Kidd comes again and verifying what the couple has said, informs Rose that the man will not go away unless he sees her. Alarmed by the clear threat at her security, Rose is nonetheless convinced to see the stranger before Bert comes back. In a way, she is drawn to confront

that which threatens her, to meet this stranger who says he knows her and who has declared her room vacant. «Like Faust with the poodle, she decides to invite the darkness into her narrow circle of light»³². This final intrusion into the room is that of a blind black man, named Riley, with whom Rose refuses to have any acquaintance. Her fear, mixed with hostility and detestation at the trespasser, is poured out in a torrent of verbal abuse:

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 deaf and dumb and blind, the lot of you. A bunch of criminals. [...]

Well you can't see me, can you? You're a blind man. An old, poor blind man. Aren't you? Can't see a dickeybird. [...]

They say I know you. That's an insult for a start. Because I can tell you, I wouldn't know you to spit on, not from a mile off³³.

Rose is terrified as Riley calls her Sal and tells her that her father is expecting her to come back home. Her initial fear and fierce rejection is gradually transformed into sort of a submissive affection towards Riley:

RILEY: I want you to come home.

ROSE: No!

RILEY: With me.

ROSE: I can't.

RILEY: I waited to see you.

ROSE: Yes.

RILEY: Now I see you.

ROSE: Yes.

RILEY: Sal.

ROSE: Not that.

RILEY: So, now.

ROSE: I've been here.

RILEY: Yes.

ROSE: Long.

RILEY: Yes.

ROSE: The day is a hump. I never go out.

RILEY: No.

ROSE: I've been here.

RILEY: Come home now, Sal³⁴.

As Rose starts to touch Riley's eyes, head and temples with her hands, Bert enters into the room. Moving from one end of the scale to the other, that is from fearful passivity to active passion, Rose presents her own fundamental

ambivalence. The intruder into the room is both feared and desired; and as Austin Quigley aptly points out, Riley, as the disrupting intruder, bases his power more on the individual vulnerabilities of Rose than on any other remarkable powers of his own³⁵. Noting that the blind man is invited in, Rose comes forth not as the victim of an arbitrary trespasser but her own psychology. Her internal conflict as regards her imprisonment in her room is externalized as Bert confronts Riley savagely:

RILEY: Mr. Hudd, your wife.

BERT: Lice! (He strikes the Negro, knocking him down, and then kicks his head several times against the gas-stove. The Negro lies still, Bert walks away. Rose stands clutching her eyes.)

ROSE: Can't see. I can't see. I can't see³⁶.

The curtain falls on the blinded Rose. Critical attempts at allegorizing the blind black man have been numerous. However, it seems like due to his silence and passivity, Riley functions basically to catalyze as the much feared but also longed for trespasser into Rose's room, the destructive elements already present in the victim's psyche. Perplexed and confused, Rose is blinded. The pseudo womb or the shell is shattered not to give birth but to annihilate the existing self. Bert, the husband, gets rid of the intruder by violence only to preserve the wholeness of the room but damage has already been done and there is nothing to be done for that. Unable to cope with oppression in her closed room, Rose loses her sight: she no longer can see or perceive.

Notes

1. H. Bloom (ed.), *Harold Pinter*, Chelsea House Publishers, New York 1987, p. 1.
2. J. L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 134.
3. H. Pinter, *Writing for Myself*, in *Plays Two*, Faber and Faber, London 1991, p. 8.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
5. A. Hinchliffe, *Harold Pinter*, Twayne Publishers, New York 1967, preface.
6. W. Kerr, *Harold Pinter*, Columbia University Press, New York 1967, p. 7.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Bloom, *Harold Pinter*, cit., p. 1.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
10. H. Pinter, *The Birthday Party*, in *Plays One*, Faber and Faber, London 1991, p. 79.
11. H. Pinter, *The Room*, in *Plays One*, cit., p. 110.
12. H. Pinter, *The Dumb Waiter*, in *Plays One*, Faber and Faber, London 1991, p. 149.
13. H. Pinter, *A Slight Ache*, in *Plays One*, cit., p. 184.
14. H. Pinter, *The Hothouse*, in *Plays One*, cit., p. 254.
15. H. Pinter, *The Party*, in *Plays Two*, cit., p. 139.
16. H. Pinter, *Writing for the Theatre*, in *Plays Two*, cit., p. x.
17. B. Dukore, *Harold Pinter*, The Macmillan Press, London 1982, p. 4.

18. M. Esslin, *Language and Silence*, in Bloom, *Harold Pinter*, cit., p. 40.
19. Pinter, *The Birthday Party*, cit., p. 4.
20. G. Almansi, H. Simon, *Harold Pinter*, Methuen & Co, London 1983, p. 102.
21. H. Pinter, *Betrayal*, in *Plays Four*, Faber and Faber, London 1991, p. 186.
22. Almansi, Simon, *Harold Pinter*, cit., p. 89.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
24. Pinter, *Writing for Myself*, cit., p. 8.
25. S. Rusinko, *British Drama: 1950 to the Present*, Twayne Publishers, Boston 1989, p. 54.
26. J. R. Hollis, *Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 1970, p. 19.
27. H. Bock, *Harold Pinter: The Room as Symbol*, in H. Bock, A. Wertheim (eds.), *Essays in Contemporary British Drama*, Max Hueber Verlag, München 1981, p. 171.
28. J. Deleon, *The Harold Pinter Tradition in Contemporary Drama*, Bogazici University Press, Istanbul 1986, p. 20.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
30. Pinter, *The Room*, cit., p. 87.
31. Pinter, *Writing for the Theatre*, cit., p. XIII.
32. Hollis, *Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence*, cit., p. 25.
33. Pinter, *The Room*, cit., p. 107.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
35. A. Quigley, *The Pinter Problem*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1975, p. 50.
36. Pinter, *The Room*, cit., p. 110.

