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INDIVIDUAL'S INCOMPREHENSIBILITY AND BRITAIN'S IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE ROOM*

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ABSTRACT

Harold Pinter is one of the most famous of the modern playwrights. He belonged to the school of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005. He was most renowned for critically-acclaimed plays such as *The Birthday Party* and regular work writing screenplays including *The Go-Between* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Pinter is revered for his inventiveness, originality, and innovation of form. His work is so efficacious that his name has been used to explain certain settings or situations –the "Pinter Pause" concerns relying on things not said to convey characters' motivations or personalities, and the "Pinteresque" refers to an inconclusive end to a comedy of subtle menace and absurdity.

Keywords: Harold Pinter, Pinteresque, playwright, Pinter Pause, *The Room*, Theatre of the Absurd

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The Swedish Nobel Committee cited that Pinter "in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms".ⁱ Over his career he became one of the most famous representatives of Theatre of the Absurd.

The Theatre of the Absurd denotes a style of theatre, a set of plays of absurdist fiction as its theme. The Theatre of the Absurd believes that the human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore there is no meaning in words, reading, writing or speaking and hence all communication breaks down. The plays are an expression of this break down. Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion, silence, while is much used by Pinter in his plays.ⁱⁱ

The term 'Theatre of the Absurd' was coined by Martin Esslin in 1960.ⁱⁱⁱ He explains in his

essay that the term was first used by Albert Camus in his 1942 essay, 'The Myth of Sisyphus'.^{iv} It is the artistic manifestation of a worldview in which the world is without meaning and a man is puppet who is controlled and menaced by unseen forces quite outside his control.

Some common features of the plays of Theatre of the Absurd are: broad comedy interspersed with horrifying images; characters caught in hopeless situations; actors engaging in repetitive or meaningless actions; dialogue full of clichés, nonsense and *non sequiturs*. In short, it is the parody or the dismissal of a well-made play. It mocks the three fundamental unities of Aristotle, namely the Unity of Place, the Unity of Time and the Unity of Action.^v Sometimes, there is confusion as to where a scene is taking place. Characters whirl in from the past and the future and action is absurd and confusing by definition.

The Room was the first play of Harold Pinter and also represented the 'comedy of menace'. It is a modern genre of drama, existing only in the modern times, owing much of its origin to Harold Pinter. It is a work of the playwrights, who are the 'non-naturalists' or 'abstractionists'. They do not say anything directly but hint at it in ambiguous terms. There is a sense of helplessness against the forces of nature and fate and general sense of depression at the pointlessness and the tragedy of life.^{vi}

The Room is such a short play. The dialogue of the play, as in many other of Pinter's plays, is comically familiar and yet disturbingly unfamiliar. It is familiar in the sense that it makes the audience think about some other instance and some other place, working as an allegory, but the allegory is not quite complete and time and again, the audience is confused with the pointlessness of and unfamiliarity of the dialogue, in which nothing seems to take place and nothing else is definite or certain except the incomprehensibility, pauses and silence, all signifying a confusion, a grand incomprehension of life itself.

The play opens with Rose, the companion of Mr. Hudd, talking incessantly and holding monologues around her husband. They are in a cosy room, but the weather outside is very bad. Rose is constantly remarking about the safety and cosiness of the room and the 'murder' that is outside. She refers to the basement downstairs and the quarters upstairs and thinks that it is only her own room that is fit enough for living that is not cold enough. All other places are not cosy enough, sometimes downright unliveable.

It is perhaps an allegory of how the modern Britons feel about themselves in Britain. They feel that only their country is liveable and they are not comfortable anywhere outside, displaying xenophobia and a hatred of everything that is foreign to their narrow national outlook.

The scene becomes livelier when the landlord Mr. Kidd comes in to talk to Rose. There is a lot of irrational dialogue between the two with one person asking something and another saying quite a different thing altogether. After a while, the landlord, Mr. Kidd leaves and another couple

happens upon the room of Rose and Mr. Hudd. This is Mr. Sands and Mrs. Sands. There is also a lot of incomprehension between the three as conversations hit dead ends and fizzle out with pauses and silences. There are a lot of *non sequiturs* like:

Mr. Sands: (looking at the room). It's a fair size, all right.

Mrs. Sands: Why don't you sit down, Mrs –

Rose: Hudd. No thanks.

Mr. Sands: What did you say?

Rose: When?

Mr. Sands: What did you say the name was?

Rose: Hudd.

Mr. Sands: That's it. You're the wife of the bloke you mentioned then?

Mrs. Sands: No, she isn't. That was Mr. Kidd.

Mr. Sands: Was it? I thought it was Hudd.

Mrs. Sands. No, it was Kidd. Wasn't it, Mrs. Hudd?

Rose: That's right. The landlord.

Mrs. Sands: No, not the landlord. The other man.

Rose: Well, that's his name. He's the landlord.

Mr. Sands: Who?

Rose: Mr. Kidd. *Pause.*^{vii}

The new Sands couple is purportedly looking for a new room to live in and someone downstairs told them that the room in which Rose lives is empty and up for hire. There is a lot of confusion about who lives downstairs and whether one lives there at all or not.

There is a lot of ambiguous and contradictory characterization with a lot of confusion about the identity of the landlord. There is confusion about who is the landlord of the building with the Sands couple suggesting that it is the husband of Rose, Mr. Hudd who is the landlord, while Rose stresses and the circumstances of the play also suggest that it was indeed Mr. Kidd who is the landlord. There is incomprehension and failure of communication right throughout the play and

Rose's interactions with every other character of the play.

There is another character that comes in at the end of the play, Riley. He is a Negro and there is a mysterious message which he wants to deliver to Rose. Though Rose has been insecure all throughout the play, but she has never before been rude to anyone, not to her husband, not to her landlord and not to the Sands couple, but as soon as Riley comes in she shows her hatred. She says that Riley is blind and cannot at all see how the room is. He does not have any idea about Rose and her surroundings, implying that Riley is also dumb.

Here, Pinter may be drawing an allegory with the modern anti-multi-culturalists in Britain who are circumspect of the immigrants, especially the black immigrants. They see them as dumb and polluting the 'purity' of Britain. They also see that the blacks and any other immigrant cannot understand the soul of Britain. For them, the blacks will always be outsiders, the race which is an alien invader in the pristine premises of Britain and which should be driven out or killed, outright, which is what happens at the end of the play, *The Room*, in which Bert, the husband of Rose comes in and speaks for the first time in play upon looking at Rose with Riley, indicating that the only sentiment he is capable of is hatred. He starts beating Riley and kills him at last, with no apparent reason.^{viii} This also suggests an allegorical truth, in which the rightist Britons hate the immigrants not for something they did, but just for something which they are.

But being a comedy of menace, and a representative of the Theatre of the Absurd, *The Room* does not do any of this directly but just hints at the possibility in very ambiguous terms.

There is one other thing at which Pinter hints at, the indifference of those who are comfortable enough, for the plight of the society and others who are not so lucky in life. He expresses this through the bourgeoisie mentality of Rose:

"I never interfere. I mean, why should I? we've got our room. We don't bother anymore else. That's the way it should be."^{ix}

The play is about the incomprehensibility of man, as an individual, and also as a collective

incomprehensibility of his nation, Britain and as an extension of any other nation.

The Room is a representation of man's hypercritical tendency of knowing something. He is in a room and holds a point of view. He doesn't let anyone in and is bogged down by it. It shows incomprehension, failure of communication. It shows incomprehensibility, both of his own and that of his country, which in this context is Britain.

The room in *The Room* represents the cosy place which we create for ourselves; in which we feel comfortable with our own worldview, which is wrong and which can be easily broken by any drift from outside.

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