

Interpretation of the Subtext of Harold Pinter's *the Room*, A Thematic Study

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Keywords: *Harold Pinter, subtext, silence, fear and violence.*

Harold Pinter (1930- 2008) is a modern British Noble-prize winning dramatist. The research tackles his first play The Room (1957). That play represents Pinter's early subtle plays where he hides meanings within their folds. In his early phase, Pinter chooses to be silent, discreet and indirect in both language and characterization. The research studies the unspoken in The Room because it tells important and crucial information about the characters, their thoughts and their past. Pinter makes his play so ambiguous that it is not understood without analyzing what is said and what is not said. Moreover, the study treats the main themes in the play: alienation, violence, menace and fear. Therefore, the research investigates the subtext in order to reveal the embedded meanings of the text. The Room primarily discusses Rose's tragedy that is unsaid. The protagonist's reaction reflects her suffering. The paper manages to discover the reasons of her tragedy through studying her attitude, and analyzing her actions, reactions, silence and gestures.

The Room is one of Harold Pinter's early plays that are vague and highly suggestive. John Brown calls Pinter's early plays –such as *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1958), *The Dumb Waiter* (1959), *The Caretaker* (1960) and *The Homecoming* (1965) –‘interior plays’ because they are all subtle and implicit (12). Brown argues that interior drama, though looks simple, has rich subtext and is highly suggestive. The characters do not tell the audience everything, but leave them to discover the incomplete parts. They come up with hidden meanings from interpreting instances of silence and repetition. They manage to decipher the symbols of objects and actions (9). Brown concludes that Pinter's early plays are like “a silent tableau” for he depends on the characters' movements rather than dialogues (15).

It worth noting that silence has become a trait in modern drama in the period after World War II. Martha Heasley Cox argues that “[t]he generation of the 1920's [after World War I] was called ‘lost,’ [and] that of the 1950's [after World War II] ‘silent’” (371). Silence is one of the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd that has become fashionable after World War II until now. Pinter is categorized by some critics as ‘absurdist.’ Silence plays a big role in his play *The Room*. Dedria Bryfonski et al. point out, “He [Samuel Beckett] is usually grouped with Pinter, Genet and Ionesco as a member of the Theatre of the Absurd and explores existential, absurdist themes” (70).

As an Absurdist, Pinter discusses in *The Room* the existentialist issue of security and the importance of having a secure home—certain forces seem to plan to usurp Rose and Bert's room. Mr. and Mrs. Sands tell Rose that the man in the basement informs them that they can take Rose's room because it is vacant (108), then the man in the basement meets Rose and asks her directly to leave (114).

R. White defines the subtext as “[t]he underlying meaning or intention of a line of dialogue” (194). J. A. Cuddon declares that Pinter represents the theatre of Silence or the theatre of the unspoken which was coined by Jean-Jacques Bernard (1888- 1972) in the 1920's (694). Cuddon defines the subtext as a “[t]heatrical jargon for the unspoken in a play; what is implied by pause and by silence. Perhaps also what Harold Pinter means by ‘the pressure behind the words’ (665).

Throughout *The Room*, Rose talks and chats continuously while Bert listens quietly, and rarely says a comment. Her long monologue reflects on the technical device of silence in the play. She is juxtaposed with Bert's character. She is talkative and open. She speaks out about her love to her room, and indirectly shows fears lest she should lose her secure home. Bert, on the contrary, is discreet. He hides his feelings and looks cold. His silence might mean his agreement with all that Rose says. His hidden thoughts, however, create of him a mysterious man. It is hard to guess why he turns violent at the end of the play.

The Room raises many questions in the audiences' heads. Who is the man in the basement? Why is Rose scared of the basement? Is Mr. Kidd really the landlord of the building where Rose and Bert live? Do Mr. and Mrs. Sands cooperate with the man in the basement to convey a message to Rose? Why has the Negro disguised himself as a blind man? What is Rose's story with the Negro? Why does Bert feel threatened by the Negro? In the play, Harold Pinter deliberately leaves the questions unanswered to urge the audiences to think of the subtext and seek the answers themselves.

As a matter of fact, Pinter tackles several themes in *The Room* like alienation, violence, menace and fear. The theme of alienation is illustrated through setting and characterization. Pinter describes Rose as a creature who likes to be imprisoned in her own place. She frequently expresses that she likes her room, and never leaves it throughout the play. She shouts at the Negro at the end of the play when he asks her to leave the room (114). The room is described by Pinter as a modern 'studio' where kitchen, bedroom and hall are in one space (91).

Benedict Nightingale believes that the setting of the play reflects poor accommodation; Nightingale remarks,

[The setting is] ... a seedy and dilapidated London, a place where lonely people slump in milk bars or stand at coffee stalls or sit in gaunt terrace houses watching the all-night buses trundle from the unfashionable south or east to the desolate north or west. ... Rose and Bert in *The Room* ... seem inseparable from this world. They belong to it as much as cockroaches to a decaying tenement (142-143).

The couple Rose and Bert are humble enough to fit in their poor environment. Like several modern people, they feel lonely and alienated from the community. Rose tells her husband, "I don't know who lives down there now [in the basement]. ... Maybe they're foreigners" (93). Rose meets Mr. and Mrs. Sands who have been looking for a vacant apartment to hire. Rose informs them that Mr. Kidd is the landlord, but she does not know where his own apartment in the building is (103-104). Then she tells them, "I don't know him [Mr. Kidd] at all. We're very quiet. ... I never interfere. I mean, why should I? ..." (105). This speech shows that the protagonists Rose and Bert have chosen by their own free will to stay at a distance from strangers. Whenever Rose receives guests, like Mr. Kidd, the Sands or the Negro, she is restless, worried and uncomfortable until they leave her room.

Rose's character is problematic. She is a sort of psycho-patient. She keeps praising her room and brags of it in the play. She only talks about its advantages. She describes it as 'warm' (91) and 'cosy' (96). She tells Bert, "It's good you weren't down there, in the basement. ... 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" (93).

Bert's taciturn character makes him ambiguous. It is hard to know what he thinks of. He chooses to become silent most of the time. He acts as a good listener to his talkative wife. He is always gloomy and strange. Nothing makes him cheerful in the play except when he could drive his van successfully in the snow; and nothing makes him mad except when he sees the Negro with his wife (116). Bert returns home happily, and says his only long speech to Rose before he notices the Negro:

But I drove her [the van].

Pause.

I sped her.

Pause.

I caned her along. She was good. Then I got back. I could see the road all right. There was no cars. One there was. He wouldn't move. I bumped him. I got my road. I had all my way. There again and back. They shoved out of it. I kept on the straight. There was no mixing it. Not with her. She was good. She went with me. She don't mix it with me. I use my hand. Like that. I get hold of her. I go where I go. She took me there. She brought me back (116).

Immediately after noticing the Negro, Bert changes his attitude from cheerfulness into anger. He strikes the man to death without listening to him, and his violence is not justified (116). Incident of physical violence is illustrated by Pinter in a stage direction:

He [Bert] takes the chair from the table and sits to the left of the NEGRO's chair, close to it. He regards the NEGRO for some moments. Then with his foot he lifts the armchair up. The NEGRO falls on to the floor. He rises slowly. .. He strikes the NEGRO, knocking him down, and then kicks his head against the gas stove several times. The NEGRO lies still. Bert walks away (116).

Pinter means to hide the motive beyond Bert's violent action to make the audience wonder and guess what the story is. One of the suggestions to solve the mystery is that the Negro man 'Riley' might have had an affair with Rose in the past. Another suggestion is that Riley or Rose's father might have been abusing Rose before the lady could escape from them.

Moreover, Hamedreza Kohzadi et al. reach a possible interpretation. They propose,

Rose's insistence on the security of the room has a close relation to her sense of guilt. Later when the Negro calls Rose 'Sal,' this significance comes to reality. She has lived with Bert under one assumed name. Perhaps she has been a prostitute that has no desire to hear about. The fear of outside is a projection of Rose's inner guilt. She fears for her own being to be exposed to the other (1693).

On a point suggestively relevant, Bert is a psycho-patient. He is sick to live under economic and social pressures. Social ills like capitalism, poverty and utilitarianism threaten city-dwellers like Bert. As a poor unhappy urban man, Bert lives in a shabby dwelling and works to keep a secure living. He works on his truck in hard weather. He is unable to become sociable or agreeable. He is not legally married to Rose. However, Rose is his soul mate, and she is the only one who accepts him as he is.

Benedict Nightingale argues, "[T]he function of individual members of an audience was to listen, ponder, and come up with their own interpretations if they wished, always confessing to an educated uncertainty when, as was often the case, the evidence seemed incomplete or ambiguous" (137-138). That is why, Pinter leaves Bert's violence unexplained. Roger Crittenden notes that Pinter describes the actions in his drama in long lines, and reduces the dialogues to few ones (91). Crittenden explains that Pinter creates a distance between him and the readers to leave points ambiguous, which leads to lack of comprehension at the end (90).

It is, in fact, common in modern drama to find abrupt unjustified action. Randa Dubnick argues that avant-garde playwrights like [Harold Pinter], Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albee cancel the idea of rising and falling action, and get rid of the traditional classical beginning, middle and ending (120).

Needless to say, violence is not a new theme in drama. It is dominant in classical and Renaissance tragedies where murder is a major issue. Besides, several modern dramatists like Harold Pinter, John Guare and Edward Albee throw light on violence as a phenomenon in modern societies. John Fletcher observes,

[L]iterature... cannot help but mirror the cruelty and violence of the times,...the hysterical cruelties inflicted by white suburbanites on colored people protesting that race should cease to influence real estate sales, or the increasingly disturbing phenomena of mass killings, or of the collective rape of young women by bands of youths, are horrors that few artists could bring themselves to deal with, at least at the present time, but we should not be surprised if writers or film-makers do eventually examine them (164).

Therefore, modern societies are fertile soil for violence and crime.

In *The Room*, the themes of menace and fear are interrelated. The protagonists Rose and Bert are afraid because they feel threatened. Pinter does not clarify what they are scared of or who is threatening them. He fills the play with mystery. The audiences believe that the characters are frightened of unknown reasons. G. Thornely and Gwyneth Roberts note that Pinter in *The Room* reflects on the characters' inability to communicate properly since they are not comfortable at their own home—they are bothered by outside danger (173).

Rose is shown to be always scared of what is outside her room. She expresses to her husband Bert, "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder. ...the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, anyway" (92). She repeats many times her hatred to live in the basement (92-93). Martin Gottfried notes, "Pinter, of course, is a specialist in fright. He plants a hint about a threat in the basement (Who lives down there?)" (255-256).

The couple who have been looking for an empty apartment in the building—Mr. and Mrs. Sands— informs Rose that they have seen a man in the basement. They say it was dark and the man was standing behind a partition so they did not see him. He did not put a light on there. He only assured them that there is "a room vacant" and that "the landlord would be upstairs" (107).

The Sands scare Rose with the mention of the mysterious man in the basement. Mrs. Sands says, "this voice [of the man] ... gave me a bit of a fright" (107). Rose actually feels threatened by both the man in the basement and the Sands. She confirms to the couple that the landlord Mr. Kidd has told her that there is no vacant room in the building (108). Then Mr. Sands shocks Rose by saying, "The man in the basement said there was one. One room. Number seven he said" (108). Here, Rose realizes he talks about her own room, and is terrified.

Mr. Kidd scares Rose also when he informs her that he had lived in her room before. His phrase "This was my bedroom" shocks and startles Rose (97). Mr. Kidd asks about Rose's rocking chair more than once (96-97). At the beginning Rose claims she has bought it herself (96). On knowing that Mr. Kidd shares memories with her in the room, she confesses that she has found it when she has moved into the room (97). Rose cannot imagine the idea that someone might usurp the room or the rocking chair from her.

Hamedreza Kohzadi et al. believe that "the room is a symbol for Rose's dream, where she can find her security within her own cosy comfortable world surrounded by the hostile, cruel world outside to such an extent that it eventually brings about her disintegration" (1694).

After the Sands leave, Mr. Kidd goes to Rose asking her to meet the stranger in the basement at her husband's absence (110). Mr. Kidd tells her, "But he knows you, Mrs. Hudd. ...You must know him" (110). Rose gets confused and frightened. She asks Mr. Kidd whether he is really the landlord, but he avoids an answer (109). She is filled with doubts about him. Her fears increase specially when he threatens to let her acquaintance come to her at her husband's presence if she refuses to see him at the moment (111). Rose accepts under pressure to allow the man to come up (112).

Rose finds out that the visitor is a blind Negro. He introduces himself as 'Riley' (112). Rose seems to recognize him, but she says, "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" (112-113). This speech shows that Rose considers Riley a hateful character from the past.

Hence, Rose pretends not to know Riley, and shows him as an unwelcomed guest by saying, "I don't want you up here. I don't know who you are. And the sooner you get out the better... You force your way up here. You disturb my evening" (112). The man's reaction to Rose's impolite speech is strange: "*He looks about the room*" (112). This astonishes and scared Rose because she thinks he is blind. Then, he says, "This is a large room" (113).

Riley tells Rose, "Your father wants you to come home" (114). The man does not talk much. His silence creates an atmosphere of mystery and menace. In horror, Rose says, nobody knows I'm here and I don't know anybody anyway" (114). This is a proof that Rose has been hiding from her father for long time. In the past, she might have run away with Bert. Her family has discovered

her hiding place and wants her back. To the audiences, this sounds ridiculous because Rose is a woman of sixty now. She exclaims, "Home? ... It's late. It's late" (114).

This part of the play throws light on the theme of alienation. Robyn Fuchs remarks,

Sociologists hold the view that the individual cannot develop in the absence of the social environment—the groups within which interaction takes place and socialization occurs. Within this context, primary socialization refers to the initial socialization that a child receives through which he or she becomes a member of society (16-17).

In *The Room*, Rose has isolated herself by her own free will from her father and family. She shares sad memories with them. She has chosen to belong to her husband Bert and reject her hateful past. She loves Bert, and communicates with his silence. For her, his silence means agreement, peace and satisfaction. The play opens with Rose preparing food for Bert and expressing how cold it is outside (91). Bert is dressed to go out. He sits at the table and eats quietly. He always occupies his eyes by looking at a magazine (91). He never reply to Rose's questions, "Can you hear the wind?..What about the rasher? Was it all right?" (91-92), and "Couldn't you run it down tomorrow? ...You looked out today?" (93-94). Rose loves Bert and is never upset for his lack of response.

Zygmunt Bauman believes that aesthetic social space is created between two strangers have intimate relationship and choose to live together (168). This is applicable to Rose and Bert. According to Bauman, each of them has fun "without judging whether this person [his/her partner] is moral or immoral" (178). On the contrary, Rose hates Riley. She works to restrict his freedom at her room by showing discourtesy, and asking him to sit in the armchair close to him (112). According to Bauman, the stereotypical image of a stranger is that he is often dishonest and tries to control the cognitive social space of his host (159). Riley bothers Rose when he looks around and says "This is a large room" (113). His remark is considered an indirect act of menace to Rose.

Mr. Kidd is also another unwelcomed stranger in the play. Rose invites him to her room believing him to be the landlord. His attitude makes her scared and bothered. He focuses on her rocking chair, and asks her if it is originally hers or found it in the room (96-97). He does not reply to Rose when she asks him if he is really the landlord (109). Bert feels uncomfortable with Kidd's presence. He never replies to any of his questions like "You're going out today, Mr. Hudd?...You're going out then, Mr. Hudd?" (96-97). Bert's gestures reflect repulsion to the man. Harold Pinter states, "*Bert yawns and stretches, and continues looking at his magazine*" (97). Mr. Kidd realized Bert discourages him to stay longer, so he excuses himself by telling Rose, "No, I won't sit down, with Mr. Hudd just having a bit of rest after his tea. I've got to go" (97).

All strangers in the play like Mr. Kidd and Riley are source of menace to the protagonists Rose and Bert. Even the Sands are the same. They all scare Rose and make her feel she might lose her room, which is her secure home.

As a matter of fact, there are three main motifs in *The Room*: Bert's magazine, Rose's rocking chair and the unwelcomed guest. Bert's magazine and Rose's rocking chair are motifs of alienation in the play. They incarnate silence and promote lack of communication between the couple. Instead of interacting together as loving partners, Bert often goes to his magazine, and Rose frequently rocks herself on the chair.

The unwelcomed guest is a common motif in several modern plays like Henrik Ibsen's *The Master Builder* (1893), T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* (1949), and Horton Foote's *The Habitation of Dragons* (1993). Modern dramatists like to bring mysterious visitors from the past to bother the protagonists at present.

With Harold Pinter, the unwelcomed guest has social and political perspectives. Benedict Nightingale points out that Harold Pinter in *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* hints at the event that used to happen in Europe where a stranger imposes himself at home, and citizens feel falsely secure. Pinter refers to the Gestapo in the post-war period (138-139).

After World War II has finished, minorities in Britain like the Jews and Polish were threatened by the Gestapo (secret police) spies. In Germany, the Gestapo detectives or officers used to break

into non-Aryans' homes at any time to take them into concentration camps. Harold Pinter himself had a Jewish background, and he lived with that inner fear for years.

In *The Room*, Mr. Kidd tells Rose, "I think my mum was a Jewess. Yes, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that she was a Jewess. She didn't have many babies" (99). The mention of religion here does not add to the development of plot, but it only reflects on the playwright's ethnic affiliation. Siamak Babee et al. point out, "In talking about his first play, *The Room* (1957), Pinter made this point of view very clear. ... [T]his fear [inside the characters] is never a philosophical abstraction [, but real]. It is, in fact, based on the experience of a Jewish boy in the East End of London, of a Jew in the European Hitler" (43).

Though Mr. Kidd is the evil other or the intruder who victimizes Rose, he is also a victim of society. Like Rose, Mr. Kidd feels insecure. He has his own reason. He has a Jewish mother. Siamak Babae et al. note,

In Pinter's world, when the characters are menaced, they cannot communicate. The inability to communicate, and to communicate in the correct terms can be regarded as an expression of the mood, the unhappiness of the life, and the tragedy of the human condition. ... [S]igns of tension in ...family life ...[are shown]. ...[T]he uncertainty and unsafety of the human condition ...is a source of terror" (43).

Pinter delineates Mr. Kidd as a weird person. He raises doubts about himself by communicating improperly with Rose. Miscommunication reflects his inner conflict. He deliberately hides his true self from Rose, and manages to deceive her. He is pushed to cooperate with Riley to capture Rose.

Mr. Kidd visits Rose and Bert on the pretext that he has been checking the house pipes (95). He shows confusion when Rose asks him if he has found the pipes all right (95). He immediately changes the conversation to express that Rose and Bert's room is "cosy" (96). Mr. Kidd then says that his sister had died (99). Rose disbelieves him, and thinks he had not had any sister at all (100).

Rose suspects Mr. Kidd's identity more when he says he does not know how many floors there are in the building (98). His answer "Floors. (*He laughs.*) Ah, we had a good few of them in the old days" is unclear (98). His justification sounds unreasonable as well: "Oh, I used to count them [the house floors], once. Never got tired of it. I used to keep a tack on everything in this house. I had a lot to keep my eye on, then. That was when my sister was alive" (98-99). It does not make sense that a landlord does not know the number of floors in his own building. Moreover, Mr. Kidd avoids giving an answer to Rose when she asks where his room is (99). His reply is evasive: "Me? I can take my pick" (100).

In terms of power relation, Riley is a conspirator, who oppressively uses Mr. Kidd and the Sands as secret agents to trap Rose. They all pave the way for his final meeting with Rose. Riley is a symbol of the Gestapo in that sense. He manipulates all characters and try to control them. He is the origin of terror and menace in the play. He threatens Rose and Bert's security, and plots to ruin their present life.

Pinter's play *The Room* is subtle, and Pinter means to hide his political views within its folds. At the time of the performance of the play, it was dangerous for Pinter to discuss politics openly. He might have endangered his life if he had done so. Mary Luckhurst argues that Pinter is indirect in his early plays like *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* (358), while he turns direct, didactic and open about politics in his late plays (369).

In the 1950s and 1960s, there was no freedom of speech, and writers would go to jail for opposing the government. However, playwrights feel free and safe to discuss their opinions in the 1990's and 2000's. Pinter's political ideas can be traced easily in his late plays like *The New World Order* (1991), *Ashes to Ashes* (1996). Marvin Carlson points out that the playwright Harold Pinter in 2002 "condemned the hypocrisy of a government that threatened war on a nation involved with weapons of mass destruction and defiance of international law when America itself possessed far more such weapons than anyone in the world and has rejected international agreements on biological and chemical weapons" (9).

In conclusion, the research uncovers the hidden meanings of Pinter's early play *The Room*. It offers various interpretations of action, and illustrates the main motifs and symbols in the play. Besides, it throws light on the four main themes: alienation, violence, menace and fear. It also shows how Pinter promotes a subtlety of expression by filling in the spaces of his play with pauses and silence. Pinter produces a discursive text, and makes the characters fail to communicate properly. Characters avoid right interactions, and often do not reply to one another's questions. Mr. Kidd, Mr. Sands and Mrs. Sands hide their true identities from the protagonist Rose. A conspiracy against the protagonists Rose and Bert is revealed where Riley manipulates Mr. Kidd and the Sands to ruin Rose and Bert's family. Riley plots to take Rose back to her father, and separate her from her husband Bert. Bert knows that Riley is a threat to his stable life with Rose. He commits an act of defense by beating up Riley to death.

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