

DEPICTION OF EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE ROOM*

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Existentialism' might appear paradoxical or even absurd, as it (existentialism) is not a viewpoint, typically associated with any sort of idealism. It can be perceived as an inverse kind of idealism, as it does pre-suppose the philosophy of existence or being, which is in some indirect sense, idealized. Pinter's existentialism conforms to it in a different way. For him, it is not the man or the universe that is absurd, but man's relationship to the universe. This paper focuses on the way Pinter portrays the characters' existential anxiety, fear, angst, isolation and alienation in his first play *The Room*. The play symbolically displays the existential anxiety of man's situation through the mingling of reality and symbolic. The dramatist also intensifies the sense of alienation by creating the atmosphere of menace.

KEYWORDS: Existentialism, Anxiety, Isolation, Alienation, Ambiguity

INTRODUCTION

Pinter's first-hand experience as a dramatist appears through his play *The Room*. The play was written and first produced in 1957. From this play, Pinter has given us a glimpse of his style and stage setting, which characterizes many of his later plays. In *The Room*, Pinter's characters activate uncertainty, mystery and insecurity in his audiences, in the very same way, as an individual does in ordinary life, when meeting some stranger, for the first time. *The Room* also deals with the existential problems like power, domination, fear, lack of communication and absurdity.

Rose and Bert are assumed to be an old couple, living in a small room in an old mansion. The relation between the two is not certain. From the beginning, Pinter manages to maintain an aura of ambiguity and uncertainty, around his characters. Rose, a woman of sixty, is completely devoted and absorbed in looking after Bert. The sense of existential anxiety of a being, with other beings arises from the sense of insecurity, initially manifested in the relationship between Rose and Bert. Both of them seem to live in separate worlds. Bert has lapsed into silence, while Rose is herself isolated within the emotional world of her own creation that conforms to her needs. Rose fusses garrulously around the room, while Bert is occupied in reading: "a magazine propped in front of him." (CW I 101)

Pinter stresses Rose's fear through her constant references to the warmth and coziness of the room, as against the darkness, dampness and abandonment of the basement flat which had at first been offered to them. Her constant aversion of the basement that, it is dark and dumb is an extension of her fear of everything that lies outside the room. Her anxiety about the basement, whether someone is staying down there or not, reveals the real and symbolic elements when she says: "I wonder who has got it now. I've never seen them, or heard of them. But I think someone's down there." (CW I 105)

Rose's existential fear is highlighted by the sudden appearance of Mr. and Mrs. Sands. Her anxiety escalates as Mrs. Sands explains her how in their search for the landlord; they had gone down to the basement. When Rose tries to

explain that there was no vacant room in the house, as she has been told by Mr. Kidd, Mrs. Sands replies:

Mrs. Sand: The man in the basement said there was one, one room, Number Seven.

Number Seven he said.

Pause

Rose: That's this room. (CW I 118)

With Mrs. Sand's query, the very basis of her existence is shaken. She vehemently denies that her room is going to be vacant. Her hidden fears and anxieties, previously manifested in her constant dwelling on the security of her world, now actualize themselves, as she is told, that it is her room that is to be let out. The young couple, not only threatens Rose's real self, undermining her very security, they also, by confirming Rose's fantasies about the basement, bring her are hidden fears to the surface and implicitly link here, with them.

Soon the young couple leaves. At the same time, Mr. Kidd (the landlord) returns in a state of anxiety. He is so agitated that he does not even bother to hear Rose's indignant questions about how people could get the idea that her room might be let out. The landlord discloses how he has been pestered by an intruder for the past few days. He further says that he didn't get a moment's peace as the intruder wants to talk to her, in the absence of her husband. Mr. Kidd also informs her that the man will not go away unless he sees her. Alarmed by the clear threat to her security, Rose is nonetheless convinced to see the stranger before Bert comes back.

At this moment, the reader and the audience can well distinguish the intruder's presence as an outward projection and concretization of Rose's hidden anxieties. She is bound to confront all that threatens her - to meet that stranger who says he knows her and who has declared her room vacant. She is horrified also, as her longings and projections of having a secure refuge have been frustrated.

Finally, the intruder enters the room with the message of darkness, from the outside world to make Rose aware of the: "delusion on which she is basing her life." (Esslin 1973 36) His name is Riley, and he is a blind black man. Rose reacts towards him with all symptoms of disgust, fear, and even racial hatred. Her fear, mixed with hostility and detestation at the trespasser, is poured out in a torrent of verbal abuse:

You're all deaf and dumb and blind, the lot of you. A bunch of cripples 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 dickey bird [*pause*] 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 off. (CW I 122-123)

Her hidden fears are externalized and she is forced to face the brute reality of life, in the figure of the blind Negro. The Negro is the key to all unanswerable questions, which come out of the world of nothingness. The Negro can be traced as a symbolic figure, as it shakes and breaks Rose's illusion of her, "cozy and quiet, world." (CW I 123) Riley is the same shadow of Rose's nightmare that has emerged from her unconscious thoughts. The darkness which was once reclusive to the basement has now shifted to her own room. The climax of the play explores Rose's hidden existential anxieties that each individual encounter in one way or another.

Riley, the blind Negro asserts that he had brought a message from her father, a message of homecoming and old bounding. He addresses Rose as 'Sal' and explains her that her father wants her to come back home. But for Rose, it has been too late: "It's late. It's late." (CW I 124) She cries, but she gets softened. Her initial fear and her fierce rejection are

gradually transformed into a sort of submissive affection towards Riley. It soon appears that Riley is not only a messenger, but that he is also her father.

As Rose starts to touch Riley's eyes, head and temples with her hands, Bert enters into the room. His entrance into the room may also be taken as that of an intruder, who sub-consciously forces Sal (Rose) to stay with her, and serve his desires and needs. He speaks for the first time in the play, telling Rose how he had driven his van at a furious speed. Again a shock effect is achieved with the simplest of means when we hear him talking for the first time in the play. He tells her how he came back safely, although: "they got it very icy out." (CW I 126) He describes how hard he drove his van: "I caned her long. She was good she went with me. She doesn'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." (CW I 126)

Bert's erotic overtones about his trip in his van clearly reveal that his sexual energy is no longer focused on Rose. His treatment of 'she' for his van has ousted Rose from his affections. While talking to her, Bert realizes that there is another person standing in the room. Seeing Riley in the room, he is enraged and attacks him. He bangs his head against the gas stove until the blind Negro lies motionless on the floor. Rose is shocked. She stands clutching her eyes and exclaims, "Can't see. I can't see. I can't see" (CW I 126)

The curtain falls on the blind Rose. The final image of the play is a reversal of the initial one. Bert is now standing and Rose is seated. Her blindness at the end corresponds to Bert's deafness at the beginning: "Peter Hall has called this type of image in Pinter's plays 'an emblem in silence' which seems to be a useful term 'since it suggests both static quality (as in a tableau), and its capacity to define the relationship between the characters at a moment in time when they do not speak.'" (Regal 14) Beginning with a visual image and concluding with another that reflects, seems central to Pinter's method. To project this visual image, movement and positioning require as much attention as the dialogue and the logic of the plot.

CONCLUSIONS

Rose's constant repetition to herself, about the security of the room, reveals her emotional desire of being with her authentic self. Her loss of sight at the end of the play confirms her fundamental link with the blind Negro, and on the other hand points to her mental deterioration. The loss of sight is a mental rather than a physical state. Her blindness also signifies the end of her relationship with Bert. Her blindness is actually being crushed into non-entity along with the herald of death and nothingness, which are personified in the figure of the blind Negro.

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