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### **Harold Pinter's The Room as a Comedy of Menace**

**Dr. Debi Prasad Misra**

*Associate Professor & HoD, Department of English, Panchmura Mahavidyalaya,  
Bankura, West Bengal, India*

#### **Abstract:**

*"The Room," a one-act play by Harold Pinter, delves into the unsettling and enigmatic world of its characters as they grapple with isolation, existential anxiety, and the ambiguity of human communication. Set in a nondescript boarding house, the play revolves around Rose, Bert Hudd, and Mr. and Mrs. Sands, exploring the mundane yet peculiar aspects of their lives. Pinter's signature use of language and pauses creates a tense atmosphere, inviting the audience to ponder the complexities of identity, power dynamics, and the surreal nature of everyday existence. As the characters navigate through mundane conversations, seemingly trivial events take on profound significance, challenging the boundaries between reality and the absurd. "The Room" stands as a compelling exploration of the human condition, filled with Pinter's distinctive blend of dark humor, psychological tension, and underlying menace.*

**Keywords: Existential Anxiety, Isolation, Absurdity, Identity.**

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The term "comedy of menace" was first used by David Campton as a subtitle to his short plays. The Lunatic View: A Comedy of Menace Now it signifies a kind of play in which a character or more characters feel the menacing presence—actual or imaginary, of some obscure and frightening force, power or personality. The dramatist exploits this kind of menace as a source of dark comedy. Harold Pinter exploited the possibilities of this kind of situation in his early plays like *The Room*, *The Birthday Party* and *A Slight Ache*, where the both the characters and the audience face an atmosphere, apparently funny but actually having suggestiveness of some impending threat from outside. Pinter himself explained the situation thus: "more often than not the speech only seems to be funny - the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life".

*The Room* is one of Pinter's most enigmatic plays in which Harold Pinter depicts the existence of menace and the emergence of tension in relationships among characters. The room in which Rose lives is the symbol of her security and comfort which she craves for and which is denied outside. But even though Rose wishes and tries desperately to cling to her room, unvisited by any outsider, she is continuously disturbed by the unsolicited visitors who break her sense of security. Moreover, the room as an image appears to be a

fundamental element of Rose's existence: "This room is all right for me... Anyway, I haven't been out. ... we are not bothered, and nobody bothers us."

But as the play proceeds, the reader perceives that Pinter's opinion about the nature of the room contradicts with Rose's assertion of its advantages, because, what is important is the realization that menace exists and that the individual is vulnerable to it. The room is, to Rose, not merely a refuge but a means to escape from worn-out conventions of society which are the symbols of the unconscious world, as it soon becomes clear: "It is very cold out... It's murder... still the room keeps warm". "It's better than the basement, anyway."

Rose tries to keep her security against the unconscious forces by expressing a sort of language which can protect her security. Even she tells a lie and claims that she does not know Mr. Kidd, who is supposed to be the landlord, and in her speech, she seeks for sentences which can protect her from any intruder and fortify her position in her room.

Rose's uncertainty and fear become intensified when Mr. and Mrs. Sands as the agents of the unknown forces give a frightful description of the basement, "It smelt damp to me. "It seemed to me darker the deeper we were going." Mrs. Sands' further description of the basement aggravates Rose's fear of insecurity: "It smelt damp to me. Anyway, we went through a kind of partition, then there was another partition, and we couldn't see where we were going. Well, it seemed to me it got darker... the further we went in."

As the story progresses, Rose's fear and anxiety get reinforced. Mr. Sands says that the "voice" in the basement told him that the number seven was going to be vacant. It is Rose's room and with Mr. Sand's query the very basis of her existence is shaken: "That's this room... This room is occupied". In the light of these incidents the agents of menace are externalized more and provide sufficient means for collapsing Rose's being. It happens when Mr. Kidd arrives. He tells Rose that a stranger from the basement insists on coming into the room: "I can't get rid of him... you have got to see him."

Kidd talks about an unnamed man who claims to be Riley. Riley is the same shadow of Rose's nightmare that has come out of her Unconscious. Rose, from the very beginning of the play, has tried to repress this shadow of darkness and blindness within her unconscious self but now it has materialized as a menacing figure. Eventually, he enters Rose's room and claims that he has brought a message from her father, a message. Rose is horrified and her longings for having a secure refuge are frustrated. The shadow of darkness has transferred from the basement to the room which was once lighted. This condition is followed by Bert's firm reaction. He beats Riley to death and Rose begins to clutch her eyes. Now, she comes to reality and to an awareness of her existence that has been suppressed for all these years. Here is her statement: "I can't see, I can't see."

The closing scene reinforces the symbolic interpretation of the play. The Negro may be considered as a symbol for the Unconscious which is mingled with the blindness of Rose. If we consider the dark, damp, gloomy labyrinth in the basement as Rose's own unconscious where all human desires, longings, dreams, fears lie, the external world and menace also becomes internalized. The room thus becomes symbolic of her existential anguish.

Pinter's play, *The Room* is hardly a comical piece. But there is no doubt that a discernible edge of humour is evident and it contributes to the underlying sense of menace and violence which rises to a horrifying crescendo at the end of the play. The attack on Riley is shocking and horrendous and perhaps our shock is increased because the moments of menace and threat in the play have been slightly diluted by hints of comedy.

The setting of the play is hardly conducive to humour. It is a room filled with depressing apparatus. The world outside the room is no brighter. Rose tells us "It's murder outside", at once conveying the chill of the outside world and a domineering sense of threat. Rose's bustling and energized attentions to the silent Bert are appalling. The emptiness between the two characters on stage is almost tangible, yet Rose's babbling strikes a comical chord. Her questions require no answers, her observations expect no acknowledgement and thus a definite sense of lightness is created. She seems content to verbalize her stream of consciousness without rejoinder from Bert. And thereby the audience is lulled into a deceptive sense of ease where only the slightest alteration of tone might reveal threat, menace and violence.

Mr. Kidd's entry into the room enhances Rose's sense of uncertainty and uneasiness. He is absurd in his diction and hilarious in his utter failure to follow a line of thought or respond to a question. His lines are full of "eh?", "what?" and other signifiers of the failing communication. And yet underlying all this comical dialogue is a darkness and menace serving to foreshadow the violence of the play's final moments. He recalls, albeit clumsily and with questionable accuracy, a past which this house has had. The prevalence of "dead", "died" and euphemisms such as "sopped it" in this section renders anything comical equally menacing.

The ominous and threatening entrance of Mr. and Mrs. Sands would seem at first to be an instance of menace or potential violence. However, Pinter injects an awkward, disconcerting sense of the comical. Their trivial bickering is comical but indicates bitterness and discord. While the bickering is trivial, the language is not always so. Pinter here combines most deftly violence and humour. We laugh at the quarrels, but sense a genuine and threatening antipathy between them in the brutality of their exchanges. This reaches a height with Mr. Sands' impatience when Mrs. Sands has witnessed him "sit down". "I did not sit bloody well down" is his ferocious retort.

The end of the play has nothing comical about it. It is fraught with absurdities and confusions that the audience cannot fathom. Pinter exploits the audience's previous tendency to laughter by encountering us with a scene of such intense, inexplicable and horrifying violence. And so, even at his point, where violence is working alone for dramatic effect, Pinter's previous use of comedy is still at work. Any comedy that might have been felt at Bert's silent leave-taking earlier, or any laughter engendered by his refusal to respond to Rose, is now overturned. Bert's silence is followed by his sudden act of violence. A

deep-seated racism finds expression in the physical violence of killing Riley. Bert, previously inert and passive, is now fatally and most awfully active.

It is perfectly clear that *The Room* is not intended to be a comical piece. An element of black humour pervades the play. Pinter's longer works like *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming* also indulge in this same sort of humour for the same purpose: to enhance the levels of threat and menace and to foreshadow the ensuing violence. As a comedy of menace, *The Room* uses just the perfect degree of humour to make violence the most horrifying.

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