

論 文

The Development Section of Harold Pinter's *The Room*

ハロルド・ピンターの『部屋』の展開部

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I

This short essay deals with some problems of Harold Pinter criticism, especially, with its ground on Comedy of Menace.¹⁾ The point of discussion is on and around the development section of Harold Pinter's first play *The Room*.

The basic component of the one-act play is the sharp contrast between the room and the outer world. While the flat is warm, bright and safe, the external world is nothing but an ever-threatening menace to one of the protagonists named Rose.

She feels comfortable in the cozy room: "I'm quite happy where I am. We're quiet, we're all right. You're happy up here."²⁾ On the other hand, she talks incessantly of a cold and hostile world outside the room during the play. Her references are frequently made, for example, to the basement below her room: "Who lives down there? . . . Maybe they're foreigners." (pp. 102-103) What is stressed here is her fear of the unknown universe which is symbolized by the expression such as the aliens lurking in the basement. Her description of the basement sometimes goes on to a further step to remind us of a coffin buried under the ground: it is so small that "There isn't room for two down there" (p. 103); the air in the basement is very subdued and stuffy, because it has no window on the walls; the walls are wet and musty; a strong feeling of

oppression is given by the ceiling which is "right on top of you." (p. 105) The analogy of the basement with a grave is emphasized by the following line of Mrs. Sand: "it seemed to me it got darker the more we went, the further we went in." (p. 117)

A dominant view of *The Room* is grounded upon a faithful reflection of the basic situation of the play described above. It has been supported by many critics since the end of the 1950's when Pinter's first five plays had their premieres in close succession. And, among them, John Russell Taylor and Martin Esslin stand in the forefront.

Austin E. Quigley laments that "Short essays by Taylor in *Anger and After* and Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* reflect parameters of opinion that seem to have received little modification in the years since then."³⁾ In *Anger and After*, Taylor praises Pinter for his technique which helps create an air of mystery and opaqueness in the outside world.⁴⁾ Pinter is often accused of deliberate mystification but Taylor insists that it is because Pinter regards what the world really is as incomprehensible.⁵⁾ According to Esslin, however, the ambiguity is highly poetic and full of symbolic meanings to be perceived. For example, Rose's fear comes from the existential anxiety and the blind Negro is a death symbol.⁶⁾

Taylor is the typical of the critics who hold the view that the fathomless quality of the play is so unique and

peculiar to Pinter that it is rather dangerous to reduce it to some specific school of drama, such as the kitchen-sink school. On the other hand, Esslin is representative of Pinter scholars who make effort to define the play as clearly as possible. There seems to be a wide difference of opinion between the two. But a point at which they meet on common ground exists: both make no question of their premise that the room is a cozy place like a womb while the outside is a gruesome one like a graveyard in *The Room*. And this view originates in Irving Wardle's article, "Comedy of Menace." Taylor and Esslin express their dependence on this term: the former calls Pinter's first few plays, including *The Room*, "comedies of menace"⁷⁾; the latter admits that "The term . . . has its justification."⁸⁾

The external world which is shrouded in mystery has given rise to various interpretations and the prototype was Wardle's article, "Comedy of Menace." But, surprisingly enough, Wardle declared that he would withdraw it, saying "I rashly applied the phrase 'comedy of menace' to Pinter's writing. I now take it back."⁹⁾ Instead, he put forth his new view that Pinter's characters were prisoners of their own imagination. According to Wardle, the room represents not so much a shelter as a gaol. This view is undoubtedly true, especially, of Pinter's recent plays, such as *One for the Road* which treats a matter of torture inflicted to political offenders. And this view comes to be advocated more and more in recent studies. As far as *The Room* is concerned, however, the view which describes the room as a refuge has been dominant among Pinter scholars, including Taylor and Esslin.

II

To begin with, I would like to think about the overall structure of *The Room* in this chapter. Esslin and some other critics consider that *The Room* lacks a

development section, and divide the play into two parts, that is, a long introduction and a decisive climax. A rather extreme example of this kind of view is seen in John Russell Brown, who states that "the whole play is Exposition."¹⁰⁾ In his view, the situation which is presented at the start of the play firmly controls the play as a whole: just as the element of uncertainty which Mr. Kidd and Mr. and Mrs. Sands bring with them foreshadows the appearance of the uncanny blind Negro, so Riley who visits the room as a messenger from some unknown place is probably ominous of another serious menace approaching to Rose. Brown holds that "If Development is story or argument, the play of Mr. Pinter . . . have very little: it is more accurate to say that Exposition has become Development, and Conclusion as well."¹¹⁾ Between Brown and Esslin, differences of opinion exist with regard to the interpretation of Conclusion, but it is more important here to point out that both critics are of the same opinion that no small proportion of the drama is devoted only to Exposition. And, as it is viewed merely as a long prologue to the violent ending, the structure of *The Room* seems to be utterly out of proportion. Especially its too long introductory part makes the whole play rather rambling and prolix.

As against the view described above, Hugh Nelson suggests that Pinter's form is closer to the well-made play than any other structural source.¹²⁾ Nelson bases his view on the fact that Pinter also looks upon himself as one of the playwrights who take the utmost care of the overall construction of the play. In a speech at the National Student Drama Festival, Pinter insisted on the point:

I pay meticulous attention to the shape of things, from the shape of a sentence to the overall structure of the play. This shaping, to put it mildly, is of the first importance.¹³⁾

There are some other interviews where Pinter

emphasized the same point.¹⁴⁾ Taking what the author has said into consideration, it is not very easy to share the view leading to the conclusion that the construction of *The Room* is loose and unfinished.¹⁵⁾

In fact, the constructive beauties of *The Room* are admired by some critics. Toshio Tamura, who classifies the play according to thematic resemblances into three categories, observes that they are arranged very symmetrically.¹⁶⁾ Bernard F. Dukore points out that Rose's opening monologue is well balanced by Bert's virtual monologue at the end, stating that "such connectives and symmetry are among Pinter's dramaturgical trademarks."¹⁷⁾ According to Nelson, Pinter's drama has so well-proportioned a form that it can be clearly divided into an introduction, a development and a dramatic climax.¹⁸⁾

And, in my opinion, *The Room* can be fairly divided from the structural standpoint as follows: the introduction consists of Rose's long monologue; in the development, Rose has short calls almost without break from Mr. Kidd and Mr. and Mrs. Sands; at the climax, Rose is faced with the violent death of the blind Negro, and then the audience find that she has suddenly gone blind. The first problem of the view with its ground on Comedy of Menace is, therefore, that it takes little account of the construction of *The Room*.

III

Next, I would like to concentrate on the function of the development section in *The Room*, which will clarify the second problem of the view with its ground on Comedy of Menace. Here, Rose has a constant stream of callers. According to Esslin, what they say and mean adds greater emphasis to the basic situation of the play, that is, a comfortable room surrounded by a hostile, complex and absurd world. It is clear that the outside world seems to be dangerous and absurd to

Rose's eye. It should not be concluded from what she says, however, that the world around her is actually in such a situation. Because they lack confirmation, the truth can not be known from her words alone. In order to grasp the actual conditions of external world, it is necessary to examine the conversations between Rose and those who come from there. In Esslin's view, it is the landlord, Mr. Kidd, who creates an atmosphere of foreboding and uncertainty "in a far more successful manner."¹⁹⁾

In the play, Mr. Kidd visits the room twice. The purpose of his first visit is in hazy vagueness. He takes the trouble to make a call at the room in the freezing night, only to have a trivial conversation with Rose in front of a silent Bert. The following passage forms part of it:

ROSE: How many floors do you got in this house?

MR. KIDD: Floors. (He laughs.) Ah, we had a good few of them in the old days.

ROSE: How many floors do you have now?

MR. KIDD: Well, to tell the truth, I don't count them now. (p. 108)

Mr Kidd's clumsy excuse for a slip of memory about the number of the floor is very funny. His answer that the house had a good number of floors implies that it no longer does. While the dialogue puts on comic tint, it produces a stuffy and uncanny atmosphere, too. To say nothing of Esslin, some other critics regard the conversation as a fair example to show the absurdity of the external world. It is sometimes compared to the Kafkaesque world: "the building seems as intricate and indefinitely extended as the Emperor's Palace in another Kafka short story, 'The Great Wall of China'."²⁰⁾ The same view is advocated by Leonard Powlik, who holds that "Like Kafka's stroller, we must create our own explanation."²¹⁾ And, creating his own explanation, Esslin observes that "The inference that

Mr. Kidd may simply be an inveterate liar or mystifier."²²) It is guessed, but never creditably demonstrated. It does not follow that he is a liar because what Mr. Kidd says is full of ambiguity. Therefore, it has to be examined how far accurately Esslin's conjecture represents the facts.

It is clear in the passage quoted above that Mr. Kidd contradicts himself. And it is also plain that what he says must puzzle not only Rose but the audience. Rose's reaction to Mr. Kidd's pointless talk about his dead sister, for example, is "I don't believe he had a sister, ever."(p. 110) Accepting Rose's speech as authoritative, Esslin deduces that Mr. Kidd must be a born Ananias. This is very plausible but, at the least, its justification makes it a premise that Mr. Kidd is making a fool of Rose without particular reason for doing so. But, if unavoidable circumstances oblige him to deceive Rose or her husband so as to patch things up for the moment, that alters the case. A key for settling the question whether Mr. Kidd is "an inveterate liar" or not is afforded by his second call at the room.

It is soon after Bert went out that Mr. Kidd appears again. He is very upset:

MR KIDD: I came straight in.

ROSE (*rising*): Mr. Kidd! I was just going to find you. I've got to speak to you.

MR KIDD: Look here, Mrs. Hudd, I've got to speak to you. I came up specially.

ROSE: There were two people in here just now. They said this room was going vacant. What were they talking about?

MR KIDD: As soon as I heard the van go I got ready to come and see you. I'm knocked out. (p. 119)

This hurried exchange exhibits a striking contrast to an earlier sticky conversation between Rose and Mr. Kidd. It is true that they are talking at cross-purpose on either

occasion, but the exchanges moving in quick tempo suggests that the play has entered on its new phase. On the first occasion, Mr Kidd reacted to Rose's words as if he were heard of hearing, but now he displays no symptoms of senility or deafness. When he echoes Rose's words, saying "I've got to speak to you," he is rather aggressive in telling her what he really wants to say. It is important that for the first time in the play they try to open up communication with each other. On this conversation, Quigley makes a sensible comment that "confusion can arise as easily between two people bent on communication directly to each other as between two people who are being mutually evasive."²³) And the ironic point is made by each speaker's ardent desire for communication. This tendency becomes more pronounced as the play proceeds. In this sense, I am of the opinion that the play has entered on its development section since the second conversation between Rose and Mr. Kidd. Its function, in a word, is disclosure.

What Mr. Kidd reveals are some hidden facts concerning the outside world. According to him, he has been constantly harried under pressure from the blind Negro who wants to see Rose. Mr. Kidd confesses that "He said when Mr. Hudd went out I was to tell him. That's why I came up before." (p. 120) But then he found that Bert was still in the room. In such a situation, it is not unreasonable for Mr. Kidd to have been evasive, trying to draw a veil over the actual state of things in the world around the room, for fear that he would give away the true purpose of his visit. Viewed in this light, it comes out that his words and deeds which seemed to be enigmatic at first have a logic. To take an example, it is explicit now that he merely avoided the topic, when the talk between Rose and him turned upon the basement.

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.

ROSE: Why's that?

MR KIDD: The rain comes in. (p. 108)

While Rose is speaking about the terribly dampish air of the basement, his first response is "Not as bad as upstairs." Then Rose presses her inquires about the basement, he make vague answers like a curt "Eh?" Finally he succeeds in guiding the conversation into other subjects. Moreover, it is true that his inability to remember the number of floors in the house helps confirm the uncanny atmosphere early in the play, but now it can be quite realistically explained as the result of his anxious desire not to speak in detail about the house where the blind Negro is lurking.

Actually, there is no one in the play that looks upon the surrounding world as absurd, except for Rose. Mr. Kidd has no trouble in going out for shopping and Rose's husband seems to drive without a hitch. Esslin's view that "The room, this small speck of warmth and light in the darkness, is a precarious foothold"²⁴⁾ has certainly been echoed in essence, for example, by Ruby Cohn who remarks that Rose is in "Kafka-land, where the rational mind does not operate."²⁵⁾ But it may safely be said that "The cold, dark damp, windy, alien world that Rose describe tell us more about Rose than about the world outside," as Quigley points out.²⁶⁾ The same view is supported by some other critics, for example, James T Boulton, who observes that "Rose is herself isolated within the emotional world of her own creation."²⁷⁾ Therefore, in my opinion, the conclusion can not be escaped that Esslin accepts as valid Rose's words about the outside world which is in fact a

reflection of his state of mind. This is the second problem of the view with its ground on Comedy of Menace.

IV

Next I would like to think about what Rose discloses in the development section. Rose signifies a deep-rooted desire repressed in the bottom of her mind. She refuses to meet the blind Negro for the first time, but, when Mr. Kidd hints that he might come into the room during the presence of her husband, she relents, saying "Fetch him. Quick. Quick!"(p. 122) Her reactions to the blind Negro is full of disgust, fear and race hatred: "You're all deaf and dump and blind , the lot of you. A bunch of cripples."(p. 123) Her open hostility to him comes from her constant dread of the mysterious outside world, for, when she knows that he is a messenger from her father, there is a sudden change in her attitude. She steps up to him and embrace him gently, caressing his eyes, the back of his head and his temples with her hands. Now she opens up her mind and her confession begins:

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, Sal. (p. 125)

This is the first and the last exchange in the whole play that shows a complete harmony between characters. Though Riley never speaks a lot, yet his response to Rose is full of affection just as a father tries to soothe his crying daughter back to their home. Each line, which consists of one-syllabled words, is simple but memorable, and their words without trimmings

effectively enforce the impression that they are both speaking to each other with minds of a severe simplicity and purity. It is a moment of peace and truth. And then, surprisingly enough, following words escapes Rose's lips: "The day is a hump. I never go out." Her confession is that she can hardly be tolerant of her life in the room.

Some critics, including Esslin, tend to overvalue the importance of the mysteriousness of the blind Negro and interpret him as a symbol of a gruesome reality of the world outside. Esslin observes that "he must therefore be a being from beyond the confines of this world: a dead man

or a messenger of death, perhaps Rose's own dead father."²⁸⁾ August Walker also contends that "the basement denizen must be death."²⁹⁾ But what they look over is the fact that it is Riley who give Rose a chance for escape from the room. Indeed Rose is afraid of the external world, and, at the same time, her desire is to be released from the long-oppressed state. Quigley indicates the vital point when he says that the blind Negro is "a representative of her inner needs."³⁰⁾ In more recent studies, there are argument in favour of this view on Rose's real want. Surendra Sahai states that "Interpretations offered by Martin Esslin and Simon Trussler of the Negro as 'an allegorical figure' and 'not so much symbolic as representative' fail to realize Rose's dilemma."³¹⁾ Ronald Knowles takes a further step and remarks that Rose's most cherished desire is to "recognize a truer identity."³²⁾

Rose is almost ready to go out with Riley, when the door bursts open and her husband comes in. He draws the curtain of the room. The stage direction says "*It is dark.*"(p. 125) What the stage-lightening effects show is that the contrast between the bright inside and the dark outside has been reversed now. The room suddenly plunged in darkness suggests symbolically that the light which Rose seeks for is no longer within

the room but without. The visual presentation is corroborative of the view that Rose has a manifest desire to get out of the room. And Rose's own blinding just before the final curtain suggests that "The internal conflict between two sides of Rose's character"³³⁾ is finally externalized in this clash between Riley and Bert.

V

This essay treated some problems of the view grounded on Comedy of Menace. The basic point of discussion is on and around the development section of *The Room*. Though some critics, including Esslin and Taylor, laments that the lack of its development makes the play structurally loose, that is still a matter for controversy. My reasons for this was threefold. First, Pinter admits that the structure of drama is his chief concern. Secondly, the constructive beauties are admired by some other critics, for example, Nelson who suggests that Pinter's form is close to that of well-made play. Thirdly, the development section of this play has its own function. The play takes a new turn in this part. Rose discloses that her life is almost intolerable. And what Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* and Taylor in *Anger and After* fail to recognize is Rose's dilemma.

The Room takes place in confined surroundings. The closed room is not simply a box in which Rose is physically encased. It is representative of her mind closed to the outside world. Though her mental wall is invisible, its existence is evident. There are always sharp contrasts between the external world and the room, for example, in humidity, temperature, brightness and so on. But the most important polarity is between Rose's fear and desire. The boundary between of her own drawing is equivalent to her mental wall. At the end of the play, the contrast between inside and

outside was suddenly reversed. This shows that outer and inner are synonyms in fact. Pinter's room is in a borderline land.

Notes

1. Comedy of Menace is a term of David Campton's coinage. He published his one-act play collectively called *The Lunatic View* in 1957, which had for its subtitle, "Comedy of Menace." The idea of this phrase was carried one step further by Irving Wardle. In an article which appeared in the September 1958 issue of *Encore*, he pointed out that there is a common draft of contemporary dramatists in Britain, including Pinter, and called it comedy of menace. This newly-coined term is derived from "comedy of manners" which has long built up a theatrical tradition in Britain. / Irving Wardle, "Comedy of Menace," *Encore*, 5 (Sep.-Oct. 1958): 28-33.
2. Harold Pinter, *The Room and The Dumb Waiter* (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 101. Subsequent references to this volume are indicated parenthetically in the text as (p. -).
3. Austin A. Quigley, *The Pinter Problem* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton U. P., 197), p. 4.
4. John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After* (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 325.
5. Taylor, *Anger and After*, p. 325.
6. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 237.
7. Taylor, *Pinter*, trans. Tetsuo Kishi (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1971), p. 47. [ジョン・ラッセル・テイラー, 『ピンター』, 喜志哲雄訳 (東京: 研究社, 1971), p. 47.]
8. Esslin, *Pinter: The Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 55.
9. Wardle, "There's Music in That Room," *The Encore Reader*, ed. Charles Marowitz, et al. (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 130.
10. John Russell Brown, "Mr. Pinter's Shakespeare," *Critical Quarterly*, 5 (Autumn, 1963): 251.
11. Brown, "Mr. Pinter's Shakespeare": 251.
12. Hugh Nelson, "The Homecoming: Kith and Kin," *Modern British Dramatists: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Russell Brown (Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 149.
13. Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre," *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 14.
14. Pinter, "Harold Pinter: An Interview with Laurence M. Bensky," *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Arthur Ganz (Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 33.
15. Taylor, *Pinter*, p. 10.
16. Toshio Tamura, "The Construction of Harold Pinter's *The Room*," *Meiji Review of Liberal Arts*, 35 (Feb. 1966): 83. [田村敏夫, 「ハロルド・ピンターの『部屋』 --その構成をめぐって」, 『明治大学教養論叢』 35号 (1966年2月): 83.]
17. Bernard F. Dukore, *Harold Pinter* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 28.
18. Nelson, p. 149.
19. Esslin, *Pinter: The Playwright*, p. 71.
20. Randall Stevenson, "Harold Pinter--Innovator?" *Harold Pinter: You Never Heard Such Silence*, ed. Alan Bold (London: Vision, 1986), p. 37.
21. Leonard Powlik, "What the Hell Is That All About?: A Peek at Pinter's Dramaturgy," *Harold Pinter: Critical Approaches*, ed. Steven H. Gale (London and Toronto: Associated U. P., 1986), p. 36.
22. Esslin, *Pinter: The Playwright*, p. 71.
23. Quigley, p. 85.
24. Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 236.
25. Ruby Cohn, "The world of Harold Pinter," *Tulane*

Drama Review, 6 (Mar. 1962): 63.

26. Quigley, p. 85.
27. James T. Boulton, "Harold Pinter: *The Caretaker* and Other Plays," *Modern Drama*, 6 (Sep. 1963): 133.
28. Esslin, *Pinter: The Playwright*, p. 70.
29. August Walker, "Message from Pinter," *Modern Drama*, 10 (May 1967): 118.
30. Quigley, p. 100.
31. Surendra Sahai, *Harold Pinter: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Dr James Hogg (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universität Salzburg, 1981), p. 12.
32. Ronald Knowles, "Names and Naming in the Play of Harold Pinter," *Harold Pinter: You Never Heard Such Silence*, p. 114.
33. Quigley, p. 107.

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