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THE AMBIGUOUS MOTHER-FIGURE IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE ROOM*

In our present-day world, everything is uncertain and relative.
There is no fixed point; we are surrounded by the unknown.

Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1972)

Endued with distinctive, idiosyncratic personalities, and – in most cases – tantalisingly equivocal, Pinter's female protagonists are all original creations. And yet, even a cursory glance at the dramatist's plays, in particular the early ones, is bound to reveal a group of women who share a considerable number of characteristics, tempting one to form some kind of generalisation as regards the representatives of the group. The fact that the women are endowed with some of the attributes usually associated with mothers has led several critics dealing with Pinter's work to refer to them as mother-figures (Esslin 1973, 61; Hayman 7, 11).

Characters like Rose in *The Room*, Meg in *The Birthday Party*, Flora in *A Slight Ache*, Mrs Stokes in *A Night Out*, or Annie and Milly in *Night School* are presented as active and busy figures, bustling about the kitchen, often engaged in some energetic activities, performing household chores. Moreover, they seem to be attentive and devoted to their families. On the other hand, they are annoyingly loquacious and conspicuously solicitous towards their – usually male – charges, doing their utmost to shelter them from the harsh reality of the outside world. Not infrequently, in their excessive protective care, they come across as possessive, domineering, even authoritarian. Quite significantly, only one of the women – Mrs Stokes – is an actual mother. The other mother-figures are childless; still, their motherly qualities manifest themselves in the way they behave towards the members of their immediate family or persons close to their heart.

Interestingly, pondering over the playwright's approach to the characterisation of mother types in his pieces, Ronald Hayman goes as far as to venture the following comment:

Pinter tends to be better when writing about mother-substitutes rather than actual mothers. (33)

Indeed, women such as Rose, Meg or Flora are, unquestionably, unique, highly complex, multifaced, hence puzzling, characters that have succeeded in capturing the attention of a large number of critics. This is not to say that the critical milieu, or the general audience for that matter, have been unanimous in their response to Pinter's mother-figures. What is recognisably Pinteresque is that his presentation of motherlike characters succeeds in eliciting various, often conflicting, reactions on the part of the addressees of his plays. This seems largely due to the fact that Pinter's view of women, notably in his early dramas, is conspicuously male (Sakellaridou 11). The variety of female characters in his pieces are invariably mysterious and ambiguous, which makes them a riddle and a challenge to his male protagonists along with the audience. Pinter epitomises the view of a woman as a figure to be loved and execrated, desired and feared, respected and scorned, and – not infrequently – lost. Skilful in evading communication, his heroines eschew his men's persistent attempts at confrontation, elude easy explanation and guard their ambiguous status.

The article is devoted to discussing Rose, the heroine of *The Room*, whose characterisation forms an integral part of the playwright's "constant effort to overcome ... obstacles" in portraying "complex" female characters (Hollis 196). It deals with the apparently impenetrable aura of ambiguity enveloping Rose – a fine example of the dramatist's unfathomable mother-figures – as well as with her complex relations with the male protagonists in the piece. Finally, particular attention is paid to the role of language in generating the equivocality around the woman in Pinter's debut play.

Written and premièred in 1957, *The Room* seems to set the tone for the plays that follow in that it deals with certain motifs and preoccupations which have since become recurrent and surface even in the mature work of the playwright. According to Martin Esslin, there are two basic components of the piece that will frequently re-emerge in the later Pinter. Firstly, *The Room* is woven around the basic situation involving contrast between a room and a cold and hostile world outside the door. Secondly, the main focus of the play is on a couple: "the man large, brutal, fifty years old" and "the woman, older than the man, almost sixty, motherly, sentimental" (1973, 61). Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly, the couple in focus is enwrapped by "an aura of ambiguity" (1973, 61) evoked so skilfully by

the playwright and maintained successfully throughout the play. It is the atmosphere of mystery and uncertainty encapsulating the protagonists and generating both interest and anxiety that constitutes the most patent characteristic of Pinter's style.

Already in the opening scene of *The Room* – a typical Pinterish gambit – not only the contrast between the warm and cosy interior and the hostile exterior but also that between the couple of the protagonists is clearly discernible. Rose, completely absorbed in attending to the needs of Bert Hudd, presumably her husband, circulating continuously between the kitchen table and the stove, or just swinging to and fro in her rocking chair, is always in motion. She is presented as an active, mobile, dynamic figure, as opposed to Bert, who is passive, submissive, quiescent, virtually lifeless. Moreover, the woman seems to be excessively attached to Bert and anxious to make herself as agreeable and useful, even indispensable, to him as possible. She exercises protective care and control like that of a mother, pampering Bert and performing even the simplest actions for this grown-up man, such as buttering his slices of bread, pouring milk into his cup, helping him put on his jersey and fixing his muffler. Bert, in contrast, sitting at the table with a magazine propped in front of him, limited in his actions to compliant acceptance of what Rose has to offer, comes across as cold, uninvolved, passionless, indifferent. Finally, it is Rose who does all the talking as the play opens; the man, on the other hand, remains ominously silent.

In his discussion of Pinter's earliest piece, Ronald Hayman offers a hardly favourable comment about the female protagonist of *The Room*:

Rose isn't a mother, but she's the prototype of all Pinter's chattering, fussing, nagging mother-figures, the women who never stop to listen but never stop asking implicitly for the goodwill of the husband or son or nephew or lodger. (11)

Unarguably, one of Rose's most conspicuous qualities is her volubility. From the very first moments of the play the woman keeps on chattering about the virtues of the room, the cold winter day outside and the dankness of the basement:

It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder.... That's right. You eat that. You'll need it. You can feel it in here. Still, the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, anyway.... It's good you were up here, I can tell you. It's good you weren't down there, in the basement. That's no joke.... Those walls would have finished you off. (101–103)

By constantly emphasising how contented she is with what she has and stressing the comfort and safety of the room as against the harsh weather

outdoors or unacceptable conditions of the basement flat, the woman makes her anxiety and insecurity apparent. Engrossed in her repetitive monologue and undaunted by the man's unresponsiveness, Rose, it seems, is giving herself the words of comfort which her inarticulate companion refuses to give her. On the other hand, it could be argued that the woman's overbearing manner and torrents of words, in fact, preclude any reaction on the part of Bert. If she poses a question, she either answers it herself or proceeds to talk about some other topic, or asks another question, granting Bert little time to voice his opinion, even if he intended to.

The scene, linguistically and visually, suggests a relationship between a mother and a child rather than a wife-husband relationship. Rose is treating Bert like her little boy, telling him not only what to eat or drink, or what to put on so as not to catch a cold, but also what he thinks and feels:

If they ever ask you, Bert, I'm quite happy where I am. We're quiet, we're all right. You're happy up here. (103)

In doing so, Rose, in fact, is evidently curtailing Bert's right or ability to exist independently. Moreover, she attempts to keep her man in the house and is clearly unwilling to let him go outside as this means letting him out of the sphere of her influence and supervision.

Rose's monologue makes her aversion to the outside world apparent to the audience; furthermore, the woman is also clearly wary of or, possibly, feels threatened by other occupants of the house:

I don't know who lives down there now. Whoever it is, they're taking a big chance. Maybe they're foreigners. (103)

Again and again, she asks herself whether there are any tenants living in other rooms. When visited by the landlord, Mr Kidd, she attempts to question him about the occupants of the basement. The landlord, however, skilfully evades the questions that betray Rose's insecurity by providing equivocal answers.

Having established the woman's insecurity, Pinter meticulously builds up an atmosphere of vagueness around Rose and the room. Apparently, the room itself, which exists in the here-and-now seems unambiguous. Still, it cannot be ascertained which floor it is, whether or not Mr Kidd is the landlord, whether the house is full, or, alternatively, whether Rose and Bert are the only tenants and have no neighbours. The evasiveness and equivocality of the people who enter the room, and thus undermine Rose's feeling of security, only compound "the elaborate vagueness about time and place" (Hayman 12).

On the face of it, there is nothing intrinsically improbable or unreal about the situation that Pinter depicts on the stage. And yet, characteristically, by accumulating a number of largely realistic details, the dramatist methodically generates and reinforces an atmosphere of menace and uncertainty reminiscent of Kafka-esque style (Esslin 1973, 62). As Esslin suggests:

The silent giant van-driver, the anxious woman clinging to the warmth of her room, and the room being situated in a house of uncertain size, so that it seems suspended between an unexplored basement and a top that loses itself in a dim, unending flight of stairs, each of these details may in itself be explained away – in accumulation they create tension and foreboding. (1973, 62)

With such finesse and subtlety Pinter has conjured up the atmosphere of apprehension that suffuses the room and the unpropitious world outside, that the disclosure of a young couple outside Rose's door – nothing too extraordinary – comes to the woman, and to the audience as well – as disturbing. The equivocal story of the couple – Mr and Mrs Sands – that follows, instead of relieving the tension, enhances it even further. The unexpected visitors, who, like Mr Kidd, disturb Rose's safe haven, tell her about their searching for the landlord of the house and learning that the room occupied by Rose and Bert is vacant. To Rose, it seems, the very idea that the room, which she regards as hers and cherishes so much, should be let is tantamount to a personal tragedy.

However, the visit of the Sands is not as puzzling and alarming as the one announced by Mr Kidd. The landlord discloses to Rose that the whole weekend he has been bothered by an intruder who desires to talk to Rose as soon as her husband is out of the room. Initially, the prospect of meeting the stranger in the absence of her husband appals Rose. Unmoved by the landlord's imploring tone, she flatly refuses to see the man. However, Mr Kidd's disquieting suggestion that the mysterious visitor might call on Rose while Bert is in forces the woman to compliance.

As the door opens and a blind Negro who calls himself Riley enters, Rose's reaction is uncanny, perplexingly ferocious. The words she utters are full of rancour, malice, even revulsion; her behaviour betrays trepidation. Apparently unmoved by the spitefulness and insults levelled at him, Riley has a message for Rose: "Your father wants you to come home" (124). And then, addressing Rose as Sal, the blind messenger adds: "Come home, Sal" (124).

At first, Rose demurs at being called by a different name; however, in time, she bows to Riley's insistent addressing her as Sal. Later on, finding the falsity in which she lives unbearable, the woman confides to the Negro that her existence is not as enviable as she professed in her opening monologue:

ROSE. I've been here.

RILEY. Yes.

ROSE. Long.

RILEY. Yes.

ROSE. The day is a hump. I never go out. (125)

Such moments of candour, rejecting poses and false pretences, denouncing mystification are exceptionally rare in Pinter. The last two sentences – the words of a simple and yet impressive and unforgettable confession – are truly poignant.

Shortly after, when Bert comes back, for the first time in the play, he speaks. In the speech of some length that he delivers, the man describes in some detail the way in which he handled his van on the road:

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 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. (126)

The erotic overtones of this vivid relation are patent. The fact that, throughout his detailed account, the van – conspicuously Bert's favourite – is referred to in the feminine gender as "she" or "her" is not without significance, it seems. It is as if Bert raised the van, his most precious possession, to the status of a person, a woman who is acquiescent, easy to control, submissive in every way, compliantly fulfilling his expectations. Interestingly, other cars, possibly perceived by Bert as his rivals on the road, are referred to in the masculine gender.

Upon discovering the presence of a stranger, Bert attacks the intruder, knocking him down and kicking his head against the gas-stove several times. His rage is quenched only when Riley lies still on the floor. The last thing the astounded audience see is Rose clutching her eyes and exclaiming: "Can't see. I can't see. I can't see" (126). The suddenness and the ferocity which constitute the traumatic finale of the piece produce a formidable effect. They come as a shock, disturb, even horrify. Furthermore, the closing episode ushers in still more apparently insoluble mysteries.

The effect of an awesome enigma is achieved, among others, by setting the accumulation of apparently transparent and unambiguous details against the shroud of secrecy, darkness and obscurity that surround what seems to be clearly marked and distinct. Thus the warm, cosy, brightly lit room occupied by Rose is contrasted with the cold night outside the window, the dampness of the basement, the multi-storeyed building with an arguable number of flats and occupants.

Martin Esslin argues that the technique employed by Pinter in this play is reminiscent of that used, among others, by Rembrandt and known as chiaroscuro (1973, 66). Chiaroscuro is a style of painting in which only light and shade are represented. The artist concentrates on black and white, on the treatment and disposition of brighter and darker masses in a picture (Brown 384). Similarly, in *The Room* the focus is on the juxtaposition of light with darkness, of the apparently known with the cryptic, and effects that such contrast produces.

On the one hand, it could be argued that the character of the black messenger sheds new light on the play's main female protagonist, on the aura of ambiguity, mystery and foreboding that envelops Rose – a woman with obscure past who is terrified of what the future has in store for her. On the other hand, however, the arrival of Riley brings in new questions as regards the character of Rose, most of which cannot be answered conclusively. Thus, the ambiguity around the protagonist intensifies.

The messenger addresses Rose as Sal. This might imply that the woman, who now passes for Rose, lives with Bert under false pretences. Possibly, she attempts to draw a veil over her true origin. Assuming that Sal is short for Sarah, a popular Jewish name, it might be argued, for instance, that Rose desires to cover up her being Jewish (Esslin 1973, 68). The woman might wish to sever her ties with what she regards as an underprivileged, oppressed or alienated group; with her foreign roots that make her feel different, inferior, unassimilated. She might seek to rid herself of the uncomfortable feeling that she is like a stranger, an outcast from society, a permanent outsider. The troubling awareness that she shares her life with Bert – living with him under the same roof, running his household, taking care of him – and all this is done under an assumed name which serves to mask her true identity, or her foreign origin – possibly seen as shameful, detestable, or, simply, precarious – entails some significant implications.

Firstly, it might account for the woman's being so keen to make herself as useful as possible, to please and pamper her man. It may also be regarded as an explanation for her having a horror of the world outside the room, of being caught out, expelled or deported. Moreover, in this light, Rose's confessing that each day of her life is a hump sounds no longer surprising. Constant fear and pressure could, indeed, turn one's existence into a daunting obstacle race. Significantly, the existential anxiety that suffuses Pinter's first play resurfaces in much of the playwright's later work.

The aura of ambiguity surrounding the character of Rose allows for other readings as well. It could be claimed, for instance, that the woman stems from an affluent family of high social status. The fact that Rose's

father sends a Negro – possibly a servant – with the message adds force to such an interpretation. If the woman, indeed, belonged to the Establishment, her marriage with Bert Hudd, a van driver with a working-class background, would have been deemed a misalliance and frowned upon. If that was the case, the marriage presumably took place after the girl's elopement, against the will of her father. The despair that saturates Rose's days might, therefore, result from the fact that, in time, she comes to realise that her marriage is a mismatch, that she and Bert are incompatible together, that they operate on different levels of awareness.

It is perhaps worth focusing on the name of Riley. "To lead the life of Riley" (Brown 2601) means to lead a comfortable, pleasant, carefree existence. It is tempting to assume that the Negro's suggestive name was not a result of a purely random selection but rather a conscious choice on the part of Pinter. The messenger imploring Rose – or Sal – to come back home might then be seen as attempting to convince the woman to reject the life of hardship and poverty and return to her former, prosperous life.

Rose's fear and lack of security might have still other motives. Indubitably, Rose, at the age of sixty, conscious of her physical inadequacy and sensing that her younger husband does not feel sexually attracted to her, may dread that Bert will turn away from her and deny her his affection. She may be terrified of not being regarded as irreplaceable. Moreover, the woman may fear betrayal on the part of Bert, or – what is even more likely – of solitude. And indeed, Bert's final monologue makes one aware of Rose's failure to satisfy his needs. The man no longer desires her; clearly, his interest has been shifted away from Rose onto his van. As Esslin graphically puts it:

The van, which Bert treats as "she," has ousted [Rose] from his affections. The journey into the winter night becomes an act of intercourse with its own triumphant orgasm. (1973, 69)

Hardly surprisingly, when confronted with such a blatant rejection, Rose feels shattered as the play draws to an end.

Finally, the possibility that Rose – before marrying Bert – was a woman of loose morals who lived a life of debauchery cannot be excluded. Now, under a new name, she is doing her utmost to keep her inglorious past secret, fearful of Bert's contempt, rejection or violent reaction fuelled by his excessive jealousy. The woman might also have led a double life after she met Bert – being Rose for her husband and becoming Sal during her secret rendezvous with other men.

Bert's vicious reaction to the presence of Riley deserves focusing on. The conclusion one is likely to form, when observing the man's brutal

assault on the old, unarmed, handicapped Negro, is that Bert may be motivated by racial hatred. His blind fury and the exclamation: "Lice!" (126) that he bellows out make his abomination blatant. However, there appear to be other, equally possible, explanations for Bert's attack. His actions may be read as seeking to prevent a hostile intrusion upon his household. It seems probable that Bert reacts so violently to what he perceives as an attempt by Rose's family to steal his woman from him. Furthermore, suspecting Rose's unfaithfulness, he may wish to put an end to her double life.

Interestingly, Bert's fit of rage reveals a new face of this so far silent, subdued, passive, virtually inert person, characterised by an almost childlike dependence on Rose. It turns out, quite surprisingly, that behind this ostensible calmness and passivity one can discover great strength, atrocity or possessiveness. When threatened, Bert turns callous and savage. Rose, by comparison, so loquacious, dynamic and domineering a character, monopolising the beginning of the play, appears to be extremely vulnerable, powerless, totally at the mercy of her tyrannical husband. Once again, it appears, Pinter has succeeded in annihilating our assumptions concerning the nature of the characters in *The Room*; once again, he has managed to prove that hardly anything in his work can be taken for granted.

Pinter's characters can be discussed in realistic terms. The task of providing a rational explanation for their actions is truly demanding, but even so, in many cases, it seems viable. Still, many critics, in their discussions of the mystification, menace, sinister and puzzling ambiguity surrounding the characters, suggest that they may be identified more precisely and interpret various Pinter characters symbolically. Alrene Sykes argues:

Although Pinter firmly denies that he uses symbolism in his plays, it is very difficult, in our symbol-conscious age, to avoid reading symbolism into them. (11)

Frequently, the temptation to explain a Pinter character symbolically seems truly irresistible. The character of Riley appears to be a case in point. The introduction of the figure of the Negro, whose symbolism is too obtrusive, is perceived by Martin Esslin as the major weakness of the play:

It is only the use of the perhaps too overtly symbolical and poetic figure of the blind Negro which might be felt as a break in style: for whereas in the rest of the play the dream-like and poetic quality arises directly from the realistic detail, here we are confronted almost with a cliché metaphor, an allegorical figure from a different – a neo-romantic or pre-Raphaelite genre. (1973, 65-66)

Whereas the room, the relationship between the coarse and brutish husband and his sensitive, emotional, dejected wife, haunted by the premonition of danger and existential fears, can be seen in entirely realistic and psychologically accurate terms (Esslin 1973, 66), the character of Riley clearly calls for a different approach. The blind Negro, who emerges from the basement with the message from Rose's father, seems to introduce a false note into this otherwise realistic piece of drama as his appearance and his mission more than invite a symbolical reading.

Riley is like an unearthly creature, a phantom, a being out of this world. He is somewhat of "an emissary from the outside who has succeeded in breaking into the circle of light;" who has destroyed the womb and drove the dwellers away from the light into the darkness (Hinchliffe 46). The Negro is seen, among others, as symbolising Rose's past or some hidden guilt complex (Hinchliffe 46); as a messenger of death or, alternatively, Rose's dead father (Esslin 1973, 68). Linking Riley with death seems inescapable. The character's most conspicuous "attributes" – his blackness and blindness – unquestionably underpin such an allegorical interpretation; both blackness and blindness are commonly read as symbols of death. In this light, Rose's fear of losing her room might be interpreted as the woman's fear of passing away, and the arrival of the black messenger as the signal of the impending death. Consequently – if one follows the symbolic strand – the fact that Rose loses her sight could suggest her death. Importantly, the various interpretations of Rose's anxieties are not mutually exclusive. Her existential fear may well coalesce with the fear of losing her man; one level of interpretation does not preclude the plausibility of others.

Undoubtedly, the aura of ambiguity that pervades Pinter's plays and envelops his characters is closely related to the playwright's verbal imagination and generated primarily by the language that his characters use. Arnold P. Hinchliffe suggests that Pinter belongs to a group of dramatists who:

... have discovered the language of a cliché as a stage device, revealing to audiences that an apparently meticulous reproduction of "real" conversation produces a result more striking in many ways than either verse or attempted Naturalism. (42)

Indeed, for the most part, the language of Pinter's *The Room* seems to be a fairly accurate reproduction of everyday conversation, the main difference consisting, perhaps, in a higher content of metaphorical significance that one feels tempted to attribute to the language of the play.

Pondering over the language of Pinter's characters in general, John Bowen maintains, quite rightly it seems, that they do not use language to show that it does not work, but rather "as a cover for their fear and loneliness. They move each in his separate prison" (Hinchliffe 42). For the

first time, the audience is confronted with such characters – figures isolated in their own, self-imposed prisons who want to keep themselves to themselves – in *The Room*. As the play opens, one can sense the loneliness pervading the piece; Bert is isolated by his silence, Rose is hedged in within the apparently safe, womb-like world of her own construction.

In his article “Between the Lines,” Pinter suggested that it would be fallacious to say that what happens in life, and in his plays, is failure to communicate:

I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. (Hinchliffe 43)

The language of the characters in *The Room* seems to constitute a good example of what Pinter might have had in mind when venturing this comment. In the course of the play we are frequently exposed to a calculated, skilfully plotted reproduction of inconsequentiality, contradictions, repetitiveness, and confusion, which, to Pinter, are all typical of everyday life. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Pinter multiplies “soundless” periods, confronting us with the characters’ reticence, pauses, silences that echo everyday speech and suggest an inability, or, more probably, unwillingness to communicate.

Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson suggest that language in Pinter becomes “the most sophisticated means of non-communication” (22). The playwright makes his heroes and heroines use a meretricious, deviant, perverse language; a language well-adjusted to concealing reality. The clumsiness of the monologues or dialogues is not accidental. Most Pinter protagonists – masters of strategy – purposely contribute to the obfuscation around them. Apparently contradictory, repetitious, oblique and evasive utterances serve to hide something. Arguably, the characters also lie, to others or to themselves, so as to conceal the truth or because “they no longer know truth’s truthful abode” (Almansi 20).

Rose opens a gallery of Pinter characters who cultivate their isolation. For the woman, the room stands for a safe place sheltering her from other people. Her monologue makes this security, or rather her need of security, evident. At one point she says:

If they ever ask you, Bert, I’m quite happy where I am. We’re quiet, we’re all right. ... And we’re not bothered. And nobody bothers us. (103)

The remark is telling. Rose is doing her best to preserve the separateness that she has meticulously created intact. That is why she is wary of all the visitors in her household, perceiving them as intruders, as a threat to

her isolation. For all her ostensible verbosity, the woman, in fact, clings to her reserve. Following closely a conventional pattern of idle conversations, she manifestly resists any real involvement into the affairs of other people, preferring to hide behind the verbal, and emotional barrier she has erected against the demands of human relationships.

There is neither understanding nor intimacy – in truth, there is no real contact at all – between Rose and Bert. Isolated by the wall of continual chattering, Rose is clearly impervious to communication. On the face of it, in the breakfast scene, the garrulous mother-figure seeks to develop some rapport with her laconic partner. However, by piling up the number of utterances and posing questions to which she already knows the answers, or which are beyond answering, Rose, in fact, fully succeeds in evading contact, in shunning meaningful communication. Paradoxically as it may sound, it is the medium of language that proves here the supreme obstacle to communication. The words uttered by Rose resemble “barbs to protect the wired enclosure of the self” (Almansi 12).

Rose’s speech validates, it seems, one more assumption concerning the language the characters use. Emphatically, language in Pinter turns into a successful method of averting silence “with its dreadful prospect of being left face to face with oneself”:

...the Pinterian language becomes the tactical instrument of one’s own cowardice, a camouflage behind we hide not necessarily what we are but what we fear or suspect we might be. (Almansi 12)

Despite its considerable length, Rose’s rambling monologue is hardly revealing or informative. Rather than dispel our doubts and eradicate the ambiguity, it compounds the mystification. Typically of Pinter, neither of the facts Rose is talking about can be taken as necessarily true or false. Like most statements of fact in the dramatist’s work they are beyond verification. On the basis of the evidence Pinter offers, one is not in a position to confirm, or, conversely, negate any of them.

Pinter’s mastery of the dialogue is evident already in this early piece. Each of the characters on the stage is endowed with his or her own distinctive idiolect. The first intruder who invades Rose’s seemingly safe hiding place is Mr Kidd. Though he engages in a conversation with the woman, he does not communicate anything. The man speaks equivocally about the layout of the house, the number of occupants, his parentage or origin. The chief purpose of this digressive dialogue seems to be to misinform and baffle rather than to elucidate. His shifty, vague, self-contradictory responses to Rose’s questions puzzle the woman as well as the audience.

It could be argued that the repetitiousness and the way the dialogue tacks back on itself betray Pinter's indebtedness to Beckett (Hayman 13). However, it needs to be stressed that already in this play Pinter's distinctive style with its dialogues in which questions and answers do not meet each other squarely begins to crystallise. In addition to the comic effect, such peculiar exchanges enhance the atmosphere of obfuscation around the persons engaged in conversations. Apparently, pre-occupied with their own lines of thought and frequently missing their cues, Pinter's characters are far from being intent on meaningful communication. The conversation between Rose and Mr Kidd is a case in point:

ROSE. What about your sister, Mr Kidd?

MR KIDD. What about her?

ROSE. Did she have any babies?

MR KIDD. Yes, she had resemblance to my old mum, I think. Taller, of course.

ROSE. When did she die then, your sister?

MR KIDD. Yes, that's right, it was after she died that I must have stopped counting.

She used to keep things in very good trim. And I gave her a helping hand. She was very grateful, right until her last. She always used to tell me how much she appreciated all the – little things – that I used to do for her. Then she copped it.

I was her senior. Yes, I was her senior. She had a lovely boudoir. A beautiful boudoir.

ROSE. What did she die of?

MR KIDD. Who?

ROSE. Your sister.

Pause.

MR KIDD. I've made ends meet. (109)

The Sands, who call upon Rose afterwards, indulge in verbal battles which inject the play with comedy. And yet, the comic in Pinter is invariably tinged with disquiet, behind laughter there lurks a threat. The ostensibly irrelevant and inconsequential bickering between Mr Sands and his wife, in fact, plays a significant role in the piece intensifying the obscurity hovering over the house and its inhabitants.

The equivocality, obfuscation and inconclusiveness characterising Mr Kidd's answers to Rose's persistent enquiries, the confusion and obscurity of Mrs Sands' story, the linguistic power-struggles between the younger couple – all these intensify the aura of awe and generate anxiety in Rose's mind. The woolly syntax – particularly noticeable in the speech of Mrs Sands – works well to reinforce the tension and vagueness.

Furthermore, Rose's verbal assault directed against Riley, the third intruder, is bewildering and the accusations levelled at him are, at times, obscure:

RILEY. My name is Riley.

ROSE. 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.... Oh, these customers. They come in here and stink the place out* [italics mine]. (122–123)

Exposed to such obscure remarks, denied any assistance from the author, left to their own resources, the audience have no alternative but to hazard guesses and form conjectures.

The device of linguistic contradictions – one of the hallmarks of Pinter's writing developed in his later plays – appears for the first time in *The Room*. The device involves presenting the audience with statements that are given importance until doubt is thrown on them by another character, or, not infrequently, by the speaker himself or herself. Mr Kidd's puzzlingly self-contradictory statements about the house that he is in charge of, or Rose's casting a shadow of doubt on what the landlord says, show the device at work. John Russell Taylor rightly points out:

The technique of casting doubt upon everything by matching each apparently clear and unequivocal statement with an equally clear and unequivocal statement of its contrary ... is one which we shall find used constantly in Pinter's plays to create an air of mystery and uncertainty. (325)

A plethora of questions that this compact, yet densely textured piece poses, encourage the audience, kept by the playwright in "chasms of ignorance" (Sykes 12) to indulge in speculations. As usual, Pinter proves "reluctant to provide a dossier on anyone" (Sykes 9), and thus no one knows what precisely impels Rose's actions; her motives are suppressed, veiled in secrecy. Unarguably, there is no single reading of *The Room* and the mystery surrounding its characters is open to any number of interpretations. In fact, the variety of possibilities seems to be one of the play's greatest assets. Martin Esslin rightly argues:

The poetic quality of such work springs, precisely, from the multiplicity of possible approaches, the ambivalence and ambiguity of the images of which it is composed. (1973, 68)

Among the most important questions that *The Room* leaves one with seems to be – is it at all plausible to break through the aura of ambiguity and unearth the truth about another person?

Rose opens a gallery of Pinter's mother-figures: heroines who come across as ambiguous, whose past and future remain vague, whose puzzling actions on the stage provoke an intense speculation and a range of responses. Yet, it seems that the very fact that Pinter's women escape easy

classification can be regarded as the dramatist's success; his plays attest to the fact that "full documentation of a character has nothing to do with success of characterisation, often lack of details can be an asset" (Sykes 30). Pinter's "Writing for the theatre" can be seen as the playwright's attempt to validate the presence of ambiguity in his works and to justify the seemingly impenetrable nature of his protagonists:

We don't carry labels on our chests, and even though they are continually fixed to us by others, they convince nobody. The desire for verification on the part of all of us, with regard to our own experience and the experience of others, is understandable but cannot always be satisfied.... A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. (11)

Endowed with maternal qualities, yet childless, the female protagonist of *The Room* lavishes motherly care on her male partner. Not infrequently, in her overbearing manner and overwhelming solicitude, the woman appears authoritarian and possessive. On the other hand, under the facade of firmness, resolution and robustness, she withholds vulnerability, a sense of guilt, obscure anxieties, secret desires. Furthermore, paradoxically as it may seem, although Rose is conspicuously loquacious, her inescapable feature is equivocality. It is so because, in fact, she proves immune to communication. By employing various linguistic devices, the woman succeeds in keeping those around her, as well as the audience, at a safe distance. Pinter's language – "a language of escapist manoeuvring" (Almansi 19) – serves to reinforce the ambiguity around his protagonists. The audience must be invariably vigilant, paying heed to "the mercurial wriggles" of the voluble heroine; to "the unexpected twist, the shameless contradiction, the dazzling non sequitur, which are smuggled into the territory of a slow and apparently dull conversation" (Almansi 19).

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