



Research Paper

To See and Not to See: The Dramaturgy of Blindness in Harold Pinter's *The Room*

Sardonyx Herald Myllemngap
Independent Researcher

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the multifaceted representation of blindness in Harold Pinter's *The Room*, demonstrating how the motif extends beyond physical impairment to encompass metaphorical, moral, racial, and existential blindness. By examining the characters' dialogues, actions, and interactions, the paper argues that blindness operates as a structural and thematic device that exposes alienation, ignorance, and the instability of perception. The analysis situates *The Room* within post-war British theatre and connects Pinter's use of blindness to broader philosophical and psychoanalytic frameworks, drawing on critical insights from contemporary scholarship. Ultimately, it argues that Pinter employs blindness not merely as a disability but as a mode of perceiving—and refusing to perceive—truth and identity.

KEYWORDS: Harold Pinter, *The Room*, blindness, alienation, perception, existentialism, otherness, absurdism

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The idea of blindness, as a trope has been used by many writers in literature as a motif to develop a plot, to express the emotions and thoughts, as well as to convey meanings which can be gleaned by readers. Blindness as a subject has been portrayed by writers like Philip Sydney in *Arcadia*, William Blake in his poem "Tiriel", and John Milton in his sonnet "When I Consider How My Light is Spent."

Harold Pinter has also employed the idea of Blindness in his one-act play, *The Room*, as way to intensify the curiosity of the audience with regards to the identity of Riley and his relation with the protagonist Rose. While the subjects of existentialism, anxiety, intrusion, and alienation have been vividly depicted by Pinter in *The Room*, the idea of Blindness as a motif can be understood only after deconstructing the many dialogues of the characters. Though the literal concept of blindness can be seen through the character of Riley, other aspects of the blind and the state of being blind can be looked at, through the other characters in the play, their dialogues, actions and reactions to various events.

The most significant aspect of the blind and blindness is revealed through the negro Riley, who has been the subject of mystery to Rose and the audience. The dark basement which he has occupied became a space which incited in Rose the existential anxiety and fear (Gairola 16). Her curiosity of the other room and its occupant is evident when said: "I've never seen who it is. Who is it? Who lives down there?" (Pinter 42).

It can be noted that Rose did not make any effort to visit and unravel the mystery of the room in the basement. This lack of effort in exploring the room can also be considered as a kind of blindness which is intentional from her part. Pinter portrayed her as a character who kept on wondering about the room instead of exploring it physically: "I wonder who has got it now. I've never seen them, or heard of them. But I think someone's down there" (Pinter 43). By keeping herself away from the mysterious, Rose imposed on herself a metaphorical blindness, which prevented her from seeing and knowing about the room which has been bothering her.

Rose's curiosity however was answered when Riley entered her room. The man was depicted as "a blind negro", thereby reflecting the literal sense of blindness. Riley and his blindness have also been treated by Pinter as a medium to display the exploitation suffered by differently abled individuals. Moreover, Rose treated Riley rudely as she finds him to be weaker than herself (Khodadadi 90): "What are you looking at? You're blind, aren't you? So what are you looking at?..... You're not deaf too, are you? You're all deaf and dumb and blind, the lot of you. A bunch of cripples" (Pinter 50).

In addition to his blindness, Riley was also depicted to be of the inferior race or being "othered" (Alvarado 4). Therefore, the verbal abuse which Rose exercised on Riley was not only directed at his disability but also at his racial identity. Her action towards Riley is ironic since it is later suggested in the play that Rose

herself belongs to the Jewish community. It seems to the audience that she has imposed on herself not only a moral blindness towards the blind negro, but also an intentional blindness towards her own identity.

Pinter's implementation of darkness as a motif to describe the basement, also foreshadows the identity of its occupant as being a blind man. It was the same darkness which acted as a barrier for Mr. and Mrs. Sands to identify the "old man." The darkness of the room also seems to be a medium through which blindness has been transferred from Riley to the couple, as seen from their contradiction on the subject of seeing a star.

"MRS SANDS. Now I come to think of it, I saw a star.

....

MR SANDS. You didn't see a star.

MRS SANDS. Why not?

MR SANDS. Because I'm telling you. I'm telling you you didn't see a star." (Pinter 47).

This episode gives a suggestion of an aspect of blindness in the Sands which is associated with uncertainty and ignorance. Mrs. Sands on commenting about her sight of a star, was confronted by her husband who objected her vision as being truthful. In such a case, the patriarchal dominion of the husband over the woman's sight can be understood as way in which the metaphorical blindness has been imposed by patriarchy over women. Since sight is associated with the idea of perception itself, the instance of Mr. Sands objecting his wife of seeing a star can be considered as a metaphorical act of him altering his wife's perception of reality. Moreover, if the play is being contextualized in the post-holocaust period, the couple may perhaps be a reference to the antisemitic spies who were trying to find the Jews. Therefore, it can be interpreted that when Mrs. Sands stated that she saw a star, she was perhaps hinting at her husband about Rose being a Jew. His ignorance of her vision on the other hand, may suggest his blindness in recognizing the true identity of Rose.

Another aspect of blindness which has been portrayed by Pinter in *The Room* is seen through the character of Bert. On his return to the room, Bert appeared to the audience as being blind towards the presence of Riley. His ignorance of Riley's presence can be considered as an intentional blindness where he failed to acknowledge the intruder, since his dialogues and actions were only directed towards Rose. It was only at the near end of the play that he acknowledged Riley with violence, thereby portraying his blindness to be an intentional act of ignorance.

"He 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." (Pinter 51).

When Riley attempted to reveal what he knew about Rose to Bert, the later silenced Riley's vision of the truth by subjugating him as "Lice". By subverting the negro's identity to that of an insect, it can be inferred that Bert regarded him as someone a knowledge inferior to his own. This may as well perhaps be an indication of Bert's own will to continue being blind about Rose and the truth of her identity.

So far, our understanding of blindness in the characters has been based on the suggestive nature of their dialogues and actions. In the case of Rose however, the idea of blindness has been poignantly displayed by Pinter. To the audience, the blindness which is seen in Rose seems to have been transferred through a direct contact between herself and Riley (Said 15). This can be traced through the stage direction as written by Pinter: "She touches his eyes, the back of his head and his temples with her hands" (Pinter 51). The transferred state of being blind from Riley to Rose also suggests a kind of connection and sympathizing companionship between the two racially inferior individual- Riley being a black man and Rose, a Jew as suggested by the name "Sal." (Alvarado 5)

Rose being in a state of blindness is furthermore highlighted by her closing dialogue "Can't see. I can't see. I can't see." (Pinter 51). While the possibility of Rose being literally blinds seems to be unrealistic, her statement of being blinded can be understood as a metaphorical implication of her situation. Being in the same room where a probable murder has taken place, Rose's words could be an indication of her attempt to alienate herself from being a witness of her husband's actions. By saying "I can't see", she not only declared herself as being blind to the murder, but also her ignorance of "The Room" being a space of violence. Her blind reaction towards Bert's attack on Riley, is also suggestive of her involvement in similar attacks as the one displayed on stage. Furthermore, her dialogues "This is a good room. You've got a chance in a place like this" (Pinter 43), may be regarded as evidential implications of the room being a place where the couple has the opportunity to exercise their devious attacks.

Rose and her involvement in trying to conceal her husband's murderous act has been vividly portrayed in the 1987 adaptation by Robert Altman. In the movie, Rose's dialogue "I can't see" has been replaced by a visual representation of her being blind. Moreover, her involvement in concealing the murder has also been displayed through her action of cautiously locking the door. (Altman, 00:47:05-00:47:28)

The concept of the differently abled can also be understood through Harold Pinter's *The Room*. Though Pinter has depicted Riley to be blind, the knowledge which he possessed about Rose gives an implication of his ability to see beyond the physical sight. From his interaction with Rose, Riley has revealed himself to know a lot more about Rose and her concealed identity. By telling Rose "Come home. Sal", the

Jewish identity of Rose has been revealed to the audience. The idea of him being blind has also been contested, when he said "Now I see you." This statement conveys the reality of how the blind can still perceive reality through their other senses (Lubomirsky). Blindness as a motif has therefore been employed by Pinter, not only as a disability, but also as a state which enables an individual to perceive reality beyond the physical sight.

Lastly, the idea of blindness as presented in *The Room* can also be extended to the space of the audience or the readers. Pinter's technique of employing non-sequiturs, ambiguity and absurdist elements in his play, has also rendered the audience blind to the facts regarding the lives of the characters. In the play, "language as a core means of communication is suspicious, meaningless and unreliable, meaning is slippery and truth is not absolute" (Hawa, 17). For instant, the death of Mr. Kid's sister remains uncertain to the audience, since the case was never clarified by the landlord and was furthermore made complicated by their illogical conversation:

"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" (Pinter 45).

As a result of the ambiguous references made by the characters in their interactions, the audience has remained blind to many aspects of reality which might have existed in the lives of the characters.

The idea of blindness as seen in *The Room*, has therefore been employed by Pinter to display not only the state of being blind, but also other aspects which metaphorically relates to misjudgments, impositions and ignorance. Though there exists only one character who was visually impaired, blindness as a symbol can be seen to have surfaced in the other characters apart from him. The idea of the blind and the inability to see, therefore has been used to represent man's ignorance of the truth and of reality, his attempt to alienate from discomfoting sights and his control over what can be seen and perceived. But all the more, it can be concluded that blindness as a trope has provided a medium through which the alternate realities and identities concealed by the everyday reality of life in "The Room", are projected and revealed.

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