

THE UNCANNY AND OTHERNESS IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE ROOM*

Harold Pinter'in *The Room* Oyununda Tekinsiz ve Ötekilik

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ABSTRACT

Harold Pinter's first play *The Room* (1957) displays the characteristics of "the uncanny" (unheimlich) developed by Ernest Jentsch and Sigmund Freud. Jentsch's dichotomy between the concepts of "new, foreign, hostile" and "old, known, familiar", the tension between animate and inanimate entities, or machine-like beings have certain reflections in the play. His dichotomy is illustrated in the components of "the room", "the couples", "the man in the basement", and "the blind Negro". In a similar fashion, how Freud approaches to the concept of "the uncanny" resonates with the play. This is particularly clear in the components of "repressed feelings of earlier years", "involuntary repetitions", "the double pattern". Therefore, this article argues that Pinter's play portrays most of the characteristics of both Jentsch and Freud's interpretation of *the uncanny*. Besides, *otherness* as a term contributes to the formation of the feeling of *uncanny* throughout the text by providing a robust reinforcement for its perception.

Keywords: *The Room*, Harold Pinter, the uncanny, otherness, dichotomy.

ÖZ

Harold Pinter'in ilk tiyatro oyunu olan *Oda* (1957) Ernest Jentsch ve Sigmund Freud tarafından geliştirilen tekinsiz (unheimlich) duygusunun özelliklerini taşımaktadır. Jentsch'in "yeni, yabancı, hasmane" ve "eski, bilinen, tanıdık" kavramları arasında; canlı ve cansız varlıklar veya makinemsi oluşlar arasındaki gerilimde tespit ettiği ikiliğin tiyatro oyununda karşılığı vardır. Yazarın bahsettiği ikilik "oda", "çiftler", "bodrumdaki adam" ve "kör zenci" bileşenlerinde resmedilmiştir. Benzer şekilde, Freud'un "tekinsiz" kavramına yaklaşımının yansımalarını oyunda görmek mümkündür. Özellikle "erken yıllardaki bastırılmış duygular", "istemsiz tekrarlar" ve "çift örnekler" gibi bileşenlerde bunu görmek olasıdır. Dolayısıyla, bu makale Jentsch ve Freud'un "tekinsiz" kavramının yorumunun birçok özelliğini Pinter'in tiyatro oyununun sergilediğini iddia etmektedir. Bunun yanı sıra, "ötekilik" terimi tekinsiz duygusunun oluşumuna güçlü bir algı meydana getirerek oyun boyunca katkıda bulunmaktadır.

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Anahtar Sözcükler: *The Room*, Harold Pinter, tekinsiz, ötekilik, ikilik.

Introduction

Harold Pinter (1930–2008), the acclaimed British playwright, is considered to be one of the most influential and prolific modern British dramatists, some of whose works have also been adapted for screen. *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), *The Homecoming* (1964), *Betrayal* (1978), and *One for the Road* (1984) are among his best-known plays. Pinter's earliest plays including his first play *The Room* (1957) are illustrative of what Martin Esslin called *Theatre of the Absurd* which foregrounds the "senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin, 1976: IX, X). By this, Esslin points out a shared pessimistic vision of human struggle and underlines the futility of human condition and purposelessness of life. In relation to this view, some of the underlying patterns of these earliest plays include unexplained actions and situations, illogical behaviors, unsettling atmosphere of the narration, amalgamation of realism and nonrealism, and the implicit malevolence and strangeness of life and characters.

The confined spaces such as "a room" are considered to be one of the most common symbols of Pinter's writing. *Kullus* (published in 1968), *The Examination* (published in 1959), *The Compartment* (unpublished, 1963), and *The Basement* (published in 1967) are all structured around a sort of room. The lack of communication or miscommunication, pauses, silences, uncertainty, a tense atmosphere, repetitions are some of the other prevalent features which can be classified under the title of *Pintaresque* style. Therefore, this study seeks to examine Pinter's play closely from a psychological perspective by taking Ernest Jentsch and Sigmund Freud's *the uncanny* into consideration and referring to the concept of *otherness* in relation to interior-exterior disruption in the play.

The two leading scholars who wrote extensively on the concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich* in German) are the German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch (1867–1919) and the Austrian neurologist and the founder of the psychoanalytic school of thought Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). In his essay titled "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" published in 1906, Jentsch tries to uncover the fundamental features of the term. One of the primary traits of *the uncanny* is the fear of the new or change, according to the writer. After ex-

plaining how the usual and hereditary look familiar to us, he elaborates on the causes of the unusual as follows:

This can be explained to a great extent by the difficulty of establishing quickly and completely the conceptual connections that the object strives to make with the previous ideational sphere of the individual – in other words, the intellectual mastery of the new thing. The brain is often reluctant to overcome the resistances that oppose the assimilation of the phenomenon in question into its proper place. (Jentsch, 1906: 4)

As understood from the quotation above, the writer establishes a dichotomy between the concepts of “new, foreign, hostile” and “old, known, familiar”. The uncertainty created by the “new, foreign, and hostile” is reasonably natural and it paves the way for the emergence of the uncanny. Jentsch later provides examples to make his point more concrete. The first example that causes the feeling of *the uncanny* is the doubt whether an apparently living thing is inanimate or an inanimate thing is a living being. One can feel uncomfortable while visiting museums which display collections of wax figures, panopticons or panoramas because the inanimate figures can leave visitors with doubt as to their inclination to come to life. A similar example the writer presents is the effect of realistic machines on people. The more authentic a machine looks and sounds, the more uneasiness it creates on individuals (Jentsch, 1906: 8).

The underlying motif of the tension between humans and inanimate objects can be clarified in relation to our “cyborg” nature, an image Donna Haraway uses to explain our hybrid form. According to her, human form is merely a combination of both organisms and machines which are based on material reality and imagination (Haraway, 1991: 150-151). The elusiveness and intertwinement between forms of humans and machines contribute to the idea of self-organized and independent non-human entities. Therefore, the reaction humans present towards machines in the play can be well-established with the help of a post human perspective which supports the idea that humans and machines are interconnected and share common features. While the authentic of machines fascinate us, it also causes uneasiness. In other words, they both create an outlook with “disturbing and pleasurable” sides (Haraway, 1991: 152). This dual sensation humans feel towards machines and *the uncanny* it generates can be a manifestation of their co-existence and hybridity.

Before discussing the play based on Jentsch's ideas, it is of great significance to remember the main incidents and developments of the work. *The Room* is set in a room where a woman named Rose Hudd prepares breakfast for her husband, Bert. Working as a van driver, Bert keeps quiet and waits for her food to be prepared before going out on a cold day. The scene is interrupted by the seemingly landlord, Kidd, with whom Rose chats briefly. After he leaves, Bert goes out for his van without talking. Rose is interrupted by Mr and Mrs Sands, a young couple who are looking for an apartment. The couple tells Rose that they have met a man living in the basement who have told them about the vacancy of the flat number 7, which is actually Rose and Bert's flat. Seeing Rose's horrified reaction, the couple leave. After the departure of the Sands, Kidd returns, informing Rose about the man in the basement who pleads to see her alone. Even though Rose is unwilling to see the mysterious person, she agrees to see him because of Kidd's insistence. The man who wants to see Rose turns out to be a blind man named Riley and he addresses Rose as "Sal". He tells Rose that her father asks her to come back home. Being confused with what she is exposed to by this stranger, Rose experiences discomfort and uneasiness. At that moment the silent Bert enters home by bragging about how he drives his van. Once Bert sees Riley, he knocks him to the floor and strikes him until Riley lies still. The moment Riley lies motionless, Rose cries out that she is blind.

Jentsch's aforementioned dichotomy to account for *the uncanny* in a text resonates with four components in *The Room*. These are "the room", "the couples", "the man in the basement", and "the blind Negro". To begin with, the room, as a place where Rose and Riley reside, is described as warm and light. On the other hand, the outside is presented as cold, dark and winter. As Rose keeps emphasizing the hostile effect of the outside world: "It's very cold out. I can tell you. It's murder" (Pinter, 1991: 85). Therefore, the room becomes an embodiment of security from the world outside. The humble household environment and the domestic relationship of a husband and wife help to endorse Jentsch's concept of "the old, known and familiar". The interior safety and peace of the couple is threatened by an unknown and hostile exterior environment, which is cold, dark and mysterious. Furthermore, "the intruders" coming from the outside world such as Kidd, the young couple and Riley pose an ambiguity and create an atmosphere of uncertainty in the text.

The second component which helps to generate *the uncanny* in the play is "the couples". Two couples, Rose and Bert as the old generation and

the young couple, Mr and Mrs Sands, are juxtaposed in order to support the dichotomy of known and unknown. The brutal husband and his sentimental wife as the old couple are contrasted with Mr and Mrs Sands, whose relationship reveals “signs of tension between a more intelligent woman and a lazy and dull man who dominates her by sheer brutality.” (Esslin, 1976: 66). In that sense, the young couple is likely to be an earlier version of Rose and Bert.

“The man in the basement” is still another component which contributes to the formation of *the uncanny* in the play. From the very beginning of the text, Rose’s explicit anxiety and excessive insistence on the warmth and cosiness of the room is contrasted with the humidity and vagueness of the basement flat. In addition to adverse physical descriptions of the basement, what the young couple tells Rose about a mysterious/unknown man living in the basement adds another layer of uneasiness into the narration:

... And then this voice said, this voice came –it said– well, it gave me a bit of fright, I don’t know about Tod, but someone asked if he could do anything for us. So Tod said we were looking for the landlord and this man said the landlord would be upstairs (Pinter, 1991: 101).

The young couple who are looking for a room encounters the mysterious man in the basement who tells them there is a vacancy in number seven, which turns out to be Rose and Bert’s room. This news comes as a shock to Rose who almost violently denies that their room will be vacant.

The final component which accounts for *the uncanny* in the play is “the blind Negro”. Being both a blind and black man and walking with a cane, Riley becomes the embodiment of the unknown and unfamiliar for Rose. This is particularly evident in Rose’s displaying emotions of disgust, fear and hatred against Riley:

Riley: My name is Riley.

Rose: I don’t care if its – 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 (Pinter, 1991: 106-107).

As someone blind, black and living in the basement for days and showing up at the door of Rose, Riley threatens Rose and Bert’s secure and cosy environment, brings uncertainties with his appearance and creates an at-

mosphere of fear and menace. The tension rises when Riley addresses Rose with a different name “Sal” and asks her to come back home. With this sudden twist, the unfamiliar figure suddenly turns into a familiar one, which helps to generate a layer of ambivalence to the text. Therefore, it is implied that there is an affinity between the blind Negro and Rose, which the reader or audience cannot be sure about. This temporary and ambiguous relation between Rose and Riley is finally disrupted with a brutal attack by Bert. The intensity of the climax is reached by the sudden death of Riley and Rose’s going blind at the end of the play. One of the so-called hostile characteristics of Riley, blindness, spreads to Rose as if blindness has transformed from one person to another (Dukore, 1982: 28).

In addition to these four components which help to bring forward the atmosphere of *the uncanny* in the text, Jentsch’s example about the potential tension between an inanimate and animate entity resonates with Bert’s unexpected and shocking action. In the opening scene of the play, Bert is presented almost like an unmoving statue who keeps silent and does not respond to Rose’s nattering. Even when he needs to go out for work, he acts mutely without communicating orally with his wife. For the most of the play, he displays “total lack of response, physical or verbal and this helps exaggerate the silence, prolong the pauses (Regal, 1995: 13). In Jentsch’s terms, he is illustrated as a wax figure from a museum until the last scene. With an unexpected twist, Bert breaks his silence when he comes back from work and beats Riley to death when he realizes his existence in the room. This “sudden, immediate contact with unsettling action” bears a sharp contrast with Bert’s former demeanor, which also leads to the formation of *the uncanny* in the play (Taylor-Batty, 2014: 22).

Sigmund Freud discusses the emergence and nature of *the uncanny* in his article titled “The Uncanny” (1919) and explores further connections with the subconscious in addition to Jentsch’s investigation of the concept. Beginning with the etymology of the word, the writer states that the word *unheimlich* encompasses the opposite meanings of “familiar, known, habitual” and “unfamiliar, unknown, distant, hidden” at the same time. To put it differently, anything *heimlich* has the potential to turn into *unheimlich* according to Freud.

What makes Freud’s investigation of *the uncanny* different from Jentsch’s approach is that Freud does not foreground uncertainty and ambiguity for the occurrence of *unheimlich*; in fact, he chooses to put the emphasis on the perception of the term, arguing that it is closely related to the

repressed feelings in the subconscious and their rising to the conscious (Kaya Erdem, 2019: 80). The way how *the uncanny* operates is explained based on the idea that once the familiar/known/habitual in the conscious are repressed for certain reasons and come to the surface as unfamiliar/unknown/distant: "...this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed" (Freud, 2003: 148). The act of repressing once the familiar and the known can be traced back to childhood, according to the writer. When the repressed feelings come flooding back, it involuntarily causes fear, anxiety and uneasiness. In this regard, examples such as an object, a person, an experience, an encounter or even death can evoke the feeling of uncanny (Öğünç, 2018, 151).

In his article, Freud elaborates on the association between *the uncanny* and repressed childhood fears by making an in-depth analysis of "The Sand Man" (1816), a short story written by E.T.A Hoffmann, a late Romantic German writer. Freud argues that the story deals with early childhood fears and their later reflections in grown-ups. Therefore, the feeling of *unheimlich* in scenes where the sand man turns children blind derives from the fear of castration embedded in the subconscious (Freud, 2003: 138-139). Freud's effort to trace back the feeling of *unheimlich* to childhood years is also endorsed by the animistic view of the universe. This view is based on the idea that every animate or inanimate entity has a spirit which rules its physical material. Freud underlines the significance of the animistic view in our mental development as follows:

It appears that we have all, in the course of our individual development, been through a phase corresponding to the animistic phase in the development of primitive peoples, that this phase did not pass without leaving behind in us residual traces that can still make themselves felt, and that everything we now find uncanny meets the criterion that it is linked with these remnants of animistic mental activity and prompts them to express themselves (Freud, 2003: 147)

The Austrian neurologist's endeavour for searching the roots of *the unheimlich* in primitive cultures and their practices contribute to his formulating certain characteristics of the term. These can be formulated as "repressed feelings of earlier years", "involuntary repetitions", "the double pattern", "coincidences", "ambiguity between real and imagination". I ar-

gue that most of these characteristics echo in Pinter's play and succeed in creating the feeling of *unheimlich* in the audience or reader.

The first of these characteristics, "the repressed feelings of earlier years", becomes crystallized in Rose's attitude and actions towards the couple and the man in the basement or the blind Negro. Mr and Mrs Sands' investigation of a vacant room where Rose resides makes Rose feel uncomfortable. For Rose, the idea that "the room which she regards as hers should be talked about as being to let is tantamount to a death sentence" (Esslin, 1976: 63). One can argue that the fear of losing a cosy room, disowning one's possessions or the disruption of the established order may be some of the underlying reasons for Rose's excessive reaction to the couple. Furthermore, if the room Rose resides in is of vital significance and role in her life, one can even argue that losing the room altogether can be associated with a sort of fear of death Rose feels.

Another example for "the repressed feelings of earlier years" in the play corresponds to Rose's attitude against the man in the basement or the blind Negro. First, Rose refuses to see him as she considers him a mysterious or an unknown intruder. When he finally shows up, Rose displays symptoms of adverse emotions. She feels irritated by being called 'Sal' and by the sentence "Your father wants you to come home". Even though Rose pretends that she does not know Riley, it is hinted that they have already known each other. Bert's shocking attack at Riley as soon as he sees the blind Negro is another indication of their familiarity. At this point it can be argued that the arrival of the blind Negro is likely to represent Rose and Bert's mysterious past or their hidden feelings of guilt. This assumption can also be supported with the last scene where Rose goes blind when Bert beats Riley to death. Riley's blackness and blindness can be interpreted as a symbol of demise, whether it is the death of Rose's father, the end of her relationship with Bert or possibly her own death. No matter why the motives for Bert's attack at Riley and Rose's going blind are not clear, one can argue that repressed feelings of the old couple come to the surface through the agency of violence, instability and shock.

"The involuntary repetitions" are the second characteristics which help to constitute *the unheimlich* in the play. Rose's incessant use of certain words and phrases such as "the room keeps warm" and "what about downstairs?" with their rambling syntax and tautologies, her repetitive manners, Riley's constant use of certain sentences in a hypnotized way, Mr Kidd and the young couple's interaction with Rose about the man in the basement

can be presented as repetitive patterns in the play. By providing such patterns, Pinter manages to build an atmosphere of uncertainty and uneasiness which helps to create a form of vagueness and tension throughout the text.

“The double pattern” is another feature Freud refers to when it comes to the formation of the feeling of *unheimlich*. According to the neurologist, “doubles” may cause discomfort or uneasiness in people as they “confront us unbidden and unexpected” (Freud, 2003: 161-162). The anxiety caused by doubles can be traced back to our ancient beliefs, Freud argues and he illustrates double examples from the story *The Sand Man*. In Pinter’s play, it is easy to find a double pattern, particularly in terms of characters. Rose and Bert, as the old couple, Mr Sands and Mrs Sands as the young couple, are presented in pairs. The old couple is likely to be the older version of the young couple. Furthermore, Riley’s calling Rose as ‘Sal’ strengthens the idea that Rose has a dual past or personality. Last but not least, the fatal end of Riley and its repercussions in Rose result in bringing two blind people at the end of the play. The multitude use of “the double pattern” in Pinter’s play adds a further layer of uneasiness and Kafkaesque uncertainty to the text.

Even though the last two characteristics, “coincidences” and “ambiguity between real and imagination” are not well reflected in the play, Bert’s arrival at a time when Riley shows up in their house after several days can be seen as a coincidence. In a similar vein, Rose’s going blind as a result of Riley’s death exemplifies a situation where reality and imagination get blurred.

The concept of *otherness* also plays a central role in the formation of *the unheimlich*, particularly in relation to interior-exterior disruption in the text. The condition and quality of *otherness* is defined as “the state of being different from and alien to the social identity of a person and to the identity of the Self” (Miller, 2015: 588). As can be understood from the definition, *the other* is presented as the binary opposition of the self. To put it differently, “the other is dissimilar to and the opposite of the self, of us, and of the same (Honderich, 1995: 637). In a postcolonial context, *the other* becomes the non-western, uncivilized, uneducated subordinates who need to be classified as inferiors because of their so-called deficiencies and shortcomings.

The overwhelming pain of feeling *the other* is also described as something undervalued accompanied with the fear of being isolated from the

dominant majority: “To be the other is to feel that one is always in a shaky position, to be always on guard, ready to be rejected ...” (Fanon, 2008: 55). Similar reflections of *othering* can be easily detected in Rose and Bert’s violent, racist and inhumane reactions against Riley. A blind and a black man walking with the help of a cane and living in the damp basement is a clear contrast to Rose and Bert and their cosy room. Blindness, darkness, and being handicapped are clear signifiers of his *otherness* in the text. In addition to these so-called inferior characteristics, the name Riley evokes his Irish origin. Taylor-Batty points out what being black and Irish means in the 1960s Britain as follows:

To be black and Irish, while not improbable, was so unlikely in 1957 as to indicate to a London audience a deliberate clash of identities, both of which, black and Irish, were subject to suspicion and hostility in certain social environments in the wake of immigration surge on the back of the 1948 British Nationalists Act (Taylor-Batty, 2014: 21)

Considering Rose’s using an overt and direct humiliation and dehumanization rhetoric against Riley as in the examples of “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 dickeybird.”, “They say I know you. That’s an insult, for a start.” (Pinter, 1991: 107) and Bert’s assault at the end, it can be argued that race hatred pervades the play as a consequence of epitomising Riley as an object of stranger-intruder. Rose’s refusing to receive the intruder, her degrading manner, and Bert’s immediate attack are clear indications of *othering* Riley, which also helps to build up an atmosphere of tension, suspense and uncertainty.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Pinter’s play features most of the characteristics of both Jentsch and Freud’s interpretation of *the uncanny* and allows for a psychological reading of the feeling of *unheimlich* throughout the text. By building an atmosphere of uncertainty, an escalating tension, a visceral shock and violence by means of characters, symbols and dialogues, the playwright manages to mirror the underlying patterns of uneasiness, fear and menace. Furthermore, *otherness* as a concept overlaps with the formation of the feeling of *the uncanny* in the play. As the *othering* of Riley character demonstrates, it completes and adds a further layer for the creation of *the uncanny* as well as it reinforces the term.

The revealing aspect of *the uncanny* feeling in the play allows for a post human reading as well. The encounter between animate and inanimate objects (Bert's statue-like posture during most of the play and his confrontation with Riley in the final scene), the uneasiness it creates (Riley is both a familiar figure and an *other* who is not welcome) and the hinted relational signs between Riley and the old couple help to illustrate the underlying reason why the feeling of *uncanny* can be connected to an area where the boundaries of human and human-like entities are blurred and elusive. Therefore, Jentsch's idea on the emergence of the feeling of *uncanny* can be read again in the light of today's human and non-human relations.

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