Multiple Identities as an Exploration of "Otherness" in Harold Pinter's The Room

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By assigning characters multiple names in his works, thus making audiences unsure of who these characters actually are, playwright Harold Pinter explored the menace present in realism. Through his poeticism, Pinter constructed the function of names as signifiers of which characters could either alter or be designated with when occupying society's various spheres, allowing for numerous interpretations concerning even a singular character. In this essay, I will look at the multiple identities of the character Rose from The Room and examine how these identities construct a sense of "otherness" against her crafted reinvention of self.

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Names and their assigned power have been recognized as important social signifiers, both historically and contemporarily. The dominating act of naming someone can be explored through multiple lenses, from former enslaved African Americans' last names denoting them as previous property, to parents assigning children a name to be used for the rest of their lives. However, it is important to note that the power of renaming oneself to better fit one's needs is not a new phenomenon. Whether out of protection or reinvention, many emigrants, previously enslaved people, and transgender people, among others, have reclaimed this ability by giving themselves new names. Additionally, some simply prefer to operate using one name as opposed to another when occupying society's various spheres. In her work on pseudonyms, Dr. Emily van der Nagel argues, "that when people rename themselves, they are seeking a name which more accurately reflects who they are or have become" (van der Nagel 14). One figure that understood the cultural importance of having multiple identities was playwright Harold Pinter. Pinter was known for his poetic language in his works, allowing for a phrase or word to contain a multitude of meanings. Character names are very much included in that poeticism, with Pinter assigning identical or similar names to characters across plays, using names as purposeful ethnic signifiers, and referring to characters with multiple names within their respective plays.

The early works of Pinter dealt with the powerful menace found in reality-based situations. By assigning characters multiple names, thus making audiences unsure of who these characters actually are, Pinter emphasized the menace present in realism. These multiple identities also emphasize characters' sense of "otherness," or the experience of being different from the accepted social norm. In his essay, "The Uncanny and the Otherness in Harold Pinter's *The Room*," Ercan Gürova argues that these standards might be seen through a post-colonial lens as mainly "non-western, uncivilized, uneducated subordinates who need to be classified as inferiors because of their so-called deficiencies and short-comings" (Gürova 97). So what do these multiple names say about a character's past? How are their current names relevant to the society they occupy now? Van der Nagel notes that "in the transgender community, 'deadnaming', or referring to a trans person with the name of their former gender identity, misgenders and devalues them," giving power to those that know the person's old identity (van der Nagel 13). The same dynamic often occurs in Pinter's plays. Knowing a character's name is a powerful thing in Pinter's works, as it is in actuality. Names in Pinter's works are a reflection of the characters' sense of self, but most importantly, their chosen name is how they wish to be seen

by society at large. Is a character reinventing themselves in order to climb a social hierarchy? To hide from their past? If an "othered" figure is privy to such valuable information, assumed positions of power may be called into question. Looking at Pinter's play *The Room*, I will examine how the multiple identities of the character Rose create a sense of "otherness" that destabilizes her crafted reinvention of self.

Pinter's first play, *The Room,* explores the power dynamics between lower class characters, deciphering a hierarchy of people on the margins of society all within one day, in one room. The main character of the play, called Rose in the character list, immediately has her identity called into question during the introductory scene. Rose is seen taking care of a man named Bert Hudd, though the exact nature of their relationship is left ambiguous by Pinter. But she makes him food and even helps him into clothes. Compared to other characters in the list, Rose is simply "ROSE", while other characters like "BERT HUDD" and "MRS. SANDS" are given last names. If she were Bert's wife, Pinter might have given her his last name in the character list. So Rose may simply be Bert's girlfriend or caretaker, tending to his needs. However, it is later revealed that Rose is claiming Bert is her husband when she introduces herself as such to the young couple, Mr. and Mrs. Sands:

> MRS SANDS. Why don't you sit down, Mrs—
> ROSE. Hudd. No thanks. (Pinter 111)

Pinter's attention to detail is prominent in the character list and how the character names appear in the context of the work. For instance, if Rose truly is Bert's wife, comparing her to Mrs. Sands raises tension as Rose is able to have a separate identity outside of her marriage, while Mrs. Sands is only identified as an extension of a union — she's given no first name in the character list. Therefore, the submissive connotations of a wife are permanently assigned to Mrs. Sands and not to Rose. Despite Rose's claim of this wife role, the conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Sands moves in a different direction before Mr. Sands can confirm Rose's marital status, asking, "You're the wife of the bloke you mentioned then?" (Pinter 112). Immediately, a quick back-and-forth between the couple ensues, leaving the question addressed to Rose unanswered. The audience will never know how Rose would have reacted to that direct question, but it is evident that by claiming such a role, she wants to be seen as a wife, which might allow her protection and gain her some kind of higher status among the lower class cast.

Pinter's choice to name the character Rose and have her seem to function as a wife is dichotomous in itself when exploring the connotations of the name. While Rose is a name with higher class connotations due to the simple beauty it evokes, it is also very sensual compared to the names of other wife figures in Pinter's works. As the name's connotations and associated qualities of the wife role misalign in such an evident way, Pinter evokes Rose's flaws in this reinvention of herself, showcasing how she truly does not fit the role she is inhabiting. Moreover, in the scene where Rose claims to be a wife to the Sandses, it appears that the conversation at hand is meaningless, only a vessel used to assert her identity. As Karolína Holmanová asserts in her thesis, *In Search of Identity: The Role of Language in Harold Pinter's Plays*, "her new self is questionable and Rose feels a constant need to affirm herself, the image she tries to create so desperately, and often seeks validation and verification" (Holmanová 26). Pinter's poeticism goes beyond the symbolism attached to "Rose," as the spoken language itself gives insight into the possibility of Rose not truly being who she claims to be. By assigning Rose a name so similar to the word "ruse," not to mention the words' similar pronunciations, Pinter displays her deceit straightforwardly. As Rose utilizes language to uphold her identity as truth, Pinter's language works decidedly against her, exposing her ruse to the audience.

The Room's opening scene not only calls Rose's assumed wife status into question, but it also introduces the audience to Rose's obsessive-like behavior concerning the house's basement. She is clearly familiar with the space, as she describes having been there before on numerous occasions; as she says to Bert, "I think it's changed hands since I was last there" (Pinter 102). Moreover, she answers Mr. Sands' question of if she had ever been down there with "Oh yes, once, a long time ago" (Pinter 115). Holmanová claims that Rose's constant mentioning of the basement is intended to display what it symbolizes for her, writing that "what the basement actually is, what is it comprised of and what it means for Rose, remain unclear throughout

the whole play. Pinter does not in any way imply that Rose herself knows the answers to these questions" (Holmanová 27). While the explicit answers to Rose's preoccupation with the basement are left ambiguous, I disagree with the statement that Pinter does not imply Rose knows more than it seems that she does. Rose's statement that she has been in the basement before only goes to emphasize her familiarity with the space, and that informs the societal-rejected "otherness" identity that she assigns to the basement as a whole. For instance, it is evident that Rose is unsettled by the basement, describing her and Bert's room as "warm" and "cosy" while the basement is "damp" (Pinter 101-102). These unsavory complaints are confirmed by the Sandses who tell Rose that the place "smelt damp to me. It seemed to me darker the deeper we were going" (Pinter 115). To have these previous thoughts echoed from outsiders who had been in the basement themselves just moments before suggests that Rose has a connection with the house's basement.

"I don't know how they live down there" is the line Rose uses to introduce the basement on the first page of *The Room* (Pinter 101). Minutes into a one-sided conversation between her and Bert, she goes on to add that she had declined a previous offer to live in the basement, saying, "I look after you, don't I, Bert? Like when they offered us the basement here I said no straight off. I knew that'd be no good" (Pinter 105), illustrating Rose's aversion to the space. Additionally, Rose asserts that her and Bert's living situation is above all "a good room. You've got a chance in a place like this" (Pinter 105). The "othered" figures living in the basement do not have "a chance" as Rose puts it. They do not even have a place to call their own, something that Rose emphasizes in her own repetition concerning the security of her and Bert's own comfortable room. While the identities of these basement people are ambiguous, their living situation is clearly not something Rose wishes to be associated with. In assuming a wife persona and in asserting the comfort of her room, Rose, by extension, is able to be recognized as a person by society: "The room itself is a fixture, it guarantees one's selfhood" (Kohzadi et al. 1693). Referencing this "they" figure in the first quote suggests that Rose is not only familiar with the basement as a space but also that she is familiar with the people that live there.

Rose and Bert's one-sided conversation is interrupted by Mr. Kidd as Bert is preparing to leave the room for the day. Rose and Kidd begin to discuss the number of floors in the house, but it quickly becomes evident that they are talking about completely different things. Pinter's playful language choice is both an auditory and visual experience:

> ROSE. How many floors you got in this house?
> MR KIDD. Floors. *(He laughs)* Ah, we had a good few of them in the old days. (Pinter 108)

As Kidd seemingly hears "floors" as "whores," he begins to allude to the building's past in housing prostitutes. Moreover, Pinter stages this bizarre, disjointed conversation, inviting the audience to decipher the meaning of the exchange and its promiscuous nature. This can be seen through Kidd's overtly sexualized language when talking about his sister:

> MR KIDD. She was a capable woman. Yes. Fine size of a woman too… She had a lovely boudoir. A beautiful boudoir. (Pinter 109)

It is within this context that Rose's preoccupations with the basement can be read in a new light. By referring to people from the basement in previously mentioned "othered" terms and by having Rose exclaim, saying "Oh, these customers. They come in here and stink the place out. After a handout, I know all about it" (Pinter 123), Pinter suggests that, perhaps, "a long time ago" Rose may herself have been a prostitute in the basement. Perhaps she has been trying to move away from this past identity as a prostitute and reinvent herself, not only assuming the role of wife as a level of protection in society's hierarchy but also creating an entirely new name and persona separate from her past self. Rose's fear of "otherness," as depicted in her obsessive behavior concerning the basement, culminates when Riley, a man given no description on the character list, comes up from the basement to speak with her. It is he who seems to unravel Rose's multiple identities.

Riley, a Black blind man of possible Irish descent, is the most obviously "othered" figure in *The Room*. The intersections of his visible identities, being both Black and disabled, are prominently "othered" traits considering the social rejection of those who are not white or able-bodied. Gürova states that "Riley becomes the embodiment of the unknown and unfamiliar for Rose" (Gürova 93), and quotes Pinter scholar Mark Taylor Batty as saying that,

> 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 (Gürova 98).

Not only is Riley disabled and Black, but Pinter's insinuation of Irish ethnicity only adds another layer to emphasize his "otherness" and the menace he may to bring to Rose in her supposedly safe room. The visual signifiers of Riley's "otherness" are not nearly enough, as Pinter purposely adds the ambiguous Irish-linked name. By explicitly exaggerating Riley's "otherness," Pinter does not allow for it to be missed by anyone. The "otherness" that Rose sees in Riley only fuels her with more evidence that the basement, and whatever activities are connected with it, is something to be avoided, or one becomes at risk of being labeled as an "other" oneself. This brings up the question of the Sandses and their role as a device to depict this menacing "otherness" from the basement and its potential to invade Rose's sanctity. While the Sandses' white and abled bodies could remove them from being deemed as menacing as Riley is, they are still associated with it. But Riley's stronger association with the basement directly correlates to his degree of "otherness" for Rose: he may live there, while the Sandses have just made a quick stop inside.

Before Riley enters in the text, Mr. Kidd discusses him with Rose, saying:

> MR KIDD. But he knows you, Mrs Hudd, he knows you.
> ROSE. How could he, Mr Kidd, when I don't know him? (Pinter 120)

Such an immediate refusal and denial of knowing an "othered" stranger illustrates Rose's anxieties about menacing outsiders entering what she sees as her safe place, possibly because they may pose the threat of revealing her past identity. Thus, she attempts to further "other" Riley, isolating him in order to deny any connection they may have. Rose hurls insults such as, "You're all deaf and dumb and blind, the lot of you. A bunch of cripples" (Pinter 123) as a defensive mechanism, reaffirming her reinvented identity even as she hides from her ambiguous past.

Riley is also directly "othered" by the text itself, with Pinter referring to him as "Negro" rather than by his assigned name. When Riley first enters the scene, the stage directions describe him as "*a blind Negro*" rather than naming him (Pinter 122). Throughout the entire work, Riley is referred to as such in the stage directions. By including the "Negro" phrase as a signifier for Riley and excluding his name, Pinter aligns the language of the text with how the characters view him: that is, to not recognize him as a whole person.

This "othering" by the text becomes most impactful when, in the face of potential death, Riley is unable to avoid being seen as a figure of menace. After returning from his time away, Bert arrives to find Rose with Riley. Bert, who is seemingly white, begins to act aggressively towards Riley in an openly ableist, violent manner: "*He regards the* NEGRO *for some moments. Then with his foot he lifts the armchair up. The* NEGRO *falls onto the floor*" (Pinter 126). However, this act is not enough to satiate Bert's rage: "*He strikes the* NEGRO*, knocking him down, and then kicks his head against the gas-stove several times. The* NEGRO *lies still*" (Pinter 126), Bert leaves Riley unconscious and very possibly dead. Even in the face of potential death, Riley is left nameless while the textual stage directions assign Bert the pronoun "he." In not describing him with a name when he faces an ambiguous ending, Pinter emphasizes that Riley is so "othered" by society that he is deemed useless and valueless.

Despite his violent, ambiguous ending, Riley, as a figure "othered" through the text, turns out to have a strong similarity to Rose. Not only are Rose and Riley connected through conventions of the text, but the

plot reveals that they have some kind of shared background; as Ercan Gürova notes, in a "sudden twist, the unfamiliar figure suddenly turns into a familiar one" (Gürova 94). While Rose starts with an an openly hostile attitude towards Riley, some of the first words spoken between them suggest a possible connection between the two:

> RILEY. My name is Riley.
> ROSE. I don't care if it's— What? That's not your name. That's not your name. (Pinter 122)

Pinter utilizes his diction intentionally to reveal another layer of Rose to the audience: she is someone who seems to know Riley, this man "othered" in every aspect, who has come up from the basement that she is so preoccupied with. Pinter makes Rose's diction purposely ambiguous when she cuts herself off to declare that Riley is not his real name. This lack of control over her language, something that had previously unraveled her reinvented identity, is apparent and noticeable; as Holmanová notes: "She starts losing control over her words and new meanings are created… Rose, unable to disprove any of them, cannot validate her own words, and hence cannot validate her identity" (Holmanová 33). Rose's lack of specification makes it unclear whether her denial of Riley's name is due to the fact that he is a Black man unlikely to have an Irish name, or that she knows him from her past and he had another identity that she is familiar with. This interaction is completely up to interpretation. However, Rose's diction can lead one to believe that Rose has interacted with Riley before. Despite her dehumanizing comments, she still allows Riley to present his name as such, even going so far as to address him as "Mister Riley" (Pinter 124). This stark dichotomy between degrading him on the basis of his existence and respecting his name perhaps plays into the concept of Rose attempting to separate herself from "otherness," yet her previous connection with Riley limits her from doing this completely. Throughout their conversation, this recognition of "otherness" in herself, however deeply subconscious, comes with the reckoning that she appears to be unable to hide behind her reinvented self any longer.

Such emotions for Rose become further amplified when Riley says, "Your father wants you to come home" (Pinter 124), shifting the direction of the play entirely. Despite Rose calling him by his proper name in their first few lines of conversation, when Riley brings up Rose's father, it appears to be the first time that she genuinely listens to what he has to say. This is signified by a pause between Riley's and Rose's lines, where Rose could be contemplating what has just been revealed to her before she continues to listen:

> RILEY. Your father wants you to come home.
> *Pause.*
> ROSE. Home?
> RILEY. Yes. (Pinter 124)

This talk leads into a revelation of another one of Rose's identities with Riley outright saying, "Come home, Sal" (Pinter 124).

It is up to interpretation how the next line, which follows another pause, is spoken. Rose asks, "What did you call me?" (Pinter 124). After Riley repeats his line, "Come home, Sal," Rose says, "Don't call me that" (Pinter 124). Note that Rose does not deny that Sal is her name. That brings up the question: is Sal potentially the name she had as a prostitute? Sal or Sally has a lower class connotation than the name "Rose" does. Has Rose reinvented herself in multiple ways — as a wife, as a woman going by the name Rose — in order to move up the social hierarchy (or up from the basement), perhaps distancing herself from the prostitute she once was? Holmanová examines this moment, writing,

> Although she begs Riley not to call her Sal, she is not able to prevent him from doing so, nor does she try to persuade him that her name is Rose. Rose cannot confirm her longed-for identity, nor is there anybody who could do so or whom could she make use of to verify it for her. But nor she can deny—and has no intention of doing so—the identity which Riley assigns to her and which she strived

> to forget and substitute (Holmanová 37).

While Rose was able to assert her identity and have it recognized by other outsider figures such as the Sandses and Mr. Kidd, her inability to do so in the face of Riley could be due to her own "otherness" being revealed in such a direct manner by a figure representing utter "otherness" himself.

The moment where Riley calls Rose "Sal" has been variously interpreted by scholars. Hamedreza Kohzadi et al. describe this instance as "a message of collapse, annihilation" (Kohzadi et al. 1695) with Riley "as an aggressor, as the Other who breaks into the room to rob her of her identity" (Kohzadi et al. 1693). While it is devastating for Rose to have her past revealed after working so hard to uphold her reinvented self, these claims that frame Riley's actions as menacing are not consistent with how he is otherwise portrayed. Though he is a character meant to embody a threat that Rose fears, this is simply how she initially perceives him. Similarly, the audience may perceive him through that lens as our interpretations are funneled through Rose's harping on the basement, which Riley comes up from. However, Pinter makes it evident that Riley is not truly menacing, exemplified by the two having the only honest, vulnerable conversation in *The Room*:

> ROSE. I've been here.
> RILEY. Yes.
> ROSE. Long.
> RILEY. Yes.
> ROSE. The day is a hump. I never go out. (Pinter 125)

This confession of Rose's loneliness is the most authentic she has been with any character in the play, including her supposed husband. Riley seems to actively listen, acknowledging Rose's vulnerability with spoken words and giving value to her confession. The two share an intimate moment, when Rose "*touches his eyes, the back of his head and his temples with her hands*" (Pinter 125), embracing this "othered" figure and showcasing a connection built on shared "otherness."

Pinter's deliberate linguistic ambiguity lends itself to poetic readings of how Riley and Rose know each other. Prevalent in Pinter's early works are looming criminal organization leaders and henchmen, allowing for an interpretation of Rose's aforementioned father figure being all powerful and a representation of control that perhaps she lacked or opposed, leading to her being "othered." Moreover, fathers can also be religious figures, such as God; in such a reading, Riley could be a priest, angel, or other emissary. It could also be possible, due to Pinter's wording that Riley himself is Rose's biological father, joining them together in their "otherness" in an even more explicit way, Rose being a descendent of this otherness. This basis could further explain why Rose wanted to separate herself from these layers of "otherness" as such traits could be directly linked to her via DNA; in such a case, she might be passing as white. Their direct biological relatedness could also be supported by Pinter's diction in Riley's dialogue with Rose. Riley moves from saying, "Your father wants you to come home" to "Come home, Sal" (Pinter 124), a move from third person to first; he also uses Rose's true name to counteract Rose's initial opposition. This shift in language could also be Riley placing himself in the fatherly position — in some way, acting as father — if he is only the messenger, perhaps a family friend or a distant relative. Despite this ambiguity, Rose and Riley's connection has a basis of shared "otherness" which only becomes strengthened once Bert attacks Riley.

After Riley is beaten unconscious and left for dead by Bert, the last few lines of the play reveal another layer of "otherness" Rose experiences: "ROSE *stands clutching her eyes.* 'Can't see. I can't see. I can't see'" (Pinter 126). Once again, Pinter's poeticism allows for a purposefully ambiguous ending, which lends itself to multiple interpretations as to whether or not Rose's blindness is literal. It is important to note that Rose's words are "I can't see" rather than "I'm blind," this difference being something that Pinter drew attention to by emphasizing it three separate times. This scene occurs after Rose touches Riley's face, including his eyes, a moment of tender, intimate connection between the two. Such a set-up could lead to a reading where the "otherness" from Riley has literally transferred over to her somehow; she has become a further "othered" version of herself by taking on his blindness and disabled identity. Transferring his lack of sight puts Rose in a

position where she has an identity forced upon her, one that she cannot fully consent to nor reinvent herself out of. Holmanová reads this transference of blindness as Rose losing "both her identities: the identity of Sal which she wanted to forget and get rid of and the identity of Rose which she has striven to create and take on" (Holmanová 37). If the blindness is to be interpreted literally, this final scene illustrates Rose taking on a prominent "othered" trait of Riley's. As a result, I would argue that, through the death of her reinvented self, this further "othering" would bring Rose's past to the surface. "Sal" is a recognition of her "otherness," whether based in familial ties or in a potential prostitute's past. Based on the complete emotional shift of the play when Rose is called Sal, I believe that Rose never entirely lost the persona of Sal, as an identity with so much impact on her life could not be transformed and forgotten so easily. Moreover, the reading that Rose is now literally blind could be a demonstration of Rose's identification with Riley after their connection has been established. If Riley has in fact been killed, Rose may be taking on a part of Riley's "otherness" as one would inherit possessions of a parental figure who passed away. The text further supports the idea of Rose as Riley's child in that Rose seems to regress to a child when Riley appears in her room, hurling lines like, "What do you think you've got here, a little girl?" and "You've got a grown up woman in this room, do you hear?" (Pinter, 122) If Rose is a child of Riley's, she can be seen as embracing the "othered" way of life that is her heritage. Kohzadi et al. discuss the ending of *The Room* through the lens of repressed memories, arguing that Rose "comes to reality and to an awareness of her existence that has been suppressed in her unconscious for all these years" (Kohzadi et al. 1695). If we interpret her sudden blindness as a representation of Rose's "otherness" coming to light, she may be perhaps taking Riley's advice to go home to her family.

However, Rose simply "can't see." Due to her connection with Riley, perhaps she is refusing to see this moment of his death occurring, unable to process the death of the one person she had a moment of vulnerability with; It may simply be too much for her to handle. In a similar vein, Rose may not want to "see" Bert attack Riley because that would make her a witness to a crime. In such a self-serving way, maybe Rose would opt to invent yet another new identity so she could hide from this present and make these events part of her past.

What does it mean to be in the position of revealing one's past identity? Harold Pinter's *The Room* explores such a question thoroughly as Pinter's poeticism, Rose's own language, and Riley's direct mention of "Sal" all work to unravel this crafted persona Rose has invented for herself. Because Riley, a figure representing a multitude of "othered" traits, is the one to explicitly reveal Rose's "otherness" and is put in a position of power. But although Riley wields control in the scene where he calls Rose "Sal", I do not believe he is attempting to undermine or hurt her. In fact, it's Riley who meets a violent end. Pinter characterizes this seemingly menacing "othered" figure as non-threatening to Rose and Bert. Rather, it is Bert, the quiet, white male, who is the violent one. It is in this multiplicity of identities that the question of "Who is the real threat?" is explored. While Pinter does not explicitly answer the questions he poses, presenting the assumed menacing "othered" Black man as beaten unconscious by the unsuspecting white man reflects a true, reality-based sense of menace that remains relevant in the present day.

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