DOI 10.35218/tco.2026.16.1.01

Scenic and Dramatic Space in Harold Pinter

Despina G. KOSMOPOULOU•

Abstract: This study explores the construction and function of space in the early plays of Harold Pinter, specifically *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1958), and *The Caretaker* (1960). Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Anne Ubersfeld and Patrice Pavis, the analysis distinguishes between scenic space—the physical stage and its visual expression—and dramatic space—the abstract, dramaturgical environment reconstructed through the spectator's imagination. By utilizing a phenomenological approach alongside Michel Foucault's concepts of heterotopia and utopia, the research examines how Pinter's settings function as "other spaces." The study highlights how these theatrical environments operate as heterotopias: isolated yet permeable sites where social norms are suspended and entry is governed by ritual or coercion. Ultimately, this paper investigates the tension between the physical reality of the stage and the non-place of utopia to reveal how Pinter's spatial dynamics shape meaning and dramatic action.

Keywords: Harold Pinter, Michel Foucault heterotopia, u-topia (non-space), Anne Ubersfeld, theatrical space, scenic space, dramatic space.

Introduction

According to Anne Ubersfeld (1999)[1], theatre constructs space. This implies that theatrical space is not merely something structured and fixed; rather, its structure is endowed with meaning depending on the conditions. According to the same theorist, there are three fundamental types of space in theatre: theatrical space, scenic

• Adjunct Professor (Collaborating Academic Staff) at the Hellenic Open University (HOU)

Scientific Associate at the Department of Theatre Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA).

Researcher at the Laboratory of Ancient Rhetoric and Dramatic Art of the Department of Philology at the University of the Peloponnese, Greece

1 Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1999

space, and dramatic space. However, both the distinction and the precise definition of each of these categories constitute a complex and challenging task. Nevertheless, in an attempt to clarify these concepts succinctly, the term *theatrical space* refers to the space occupied by the theatre as an architectural structure. *Scenic space* refers to the actual stage space in which actors perform, either by occupying the stage itself or by extending it into the audience. More specifically, scenic space constitutes the visual and spatial expression of both the action and the meaning of the theatrical text. Finally, *dramatic space* is the abstract, dramaturgical space—that is, the space referred to by the theatrical text, which the spectator or reader must reconstruct through imagination[2].

Further exploring the concept of space, we observe that space functions as a spatial environment for the individual in everyday life, who lives and experiences the emotional states diffusely generated by the surrounding environment[3].

Within theatrical contexts, architectural space is a simple reflection of spatial arrangement and occupies a specific location within the city where the structure is situated. In contrast, scenic space is closely associated with the imaginary. Within scenic space, a story unfolds—a dramatic event visually represented by the director (Kosmopoulou, 2018). But how is dramatic space constructed?

A playwright constructs and defines the space of reality based on their own perceptions. In other words, dramatic space is constituted through meaningful representations of events, emotions, and both absurd and logical situations, forming a condensation of the dramaturgical essence (Kosmopoulou, 2018).

In the present study, guided by the concepts of dramatic and scenic space, we examine selected plays by the British playwright Harold Pinter.[4] Specifically, the works under analysis are *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1958), and *The Caretaker* (1960). For the exploration of dramatic and scenic space, the theoretical framework of phenomenology, along with the Foucauldian concepts of heterotopia and utopia, will serve as key conceptual tools.

2 Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, translated by A. Stroubouli, edited by Ch. K. Georgousopoulos, Gutenberg, Athens, 2006

3 G. Pefanis, *Theatre and Symbols: Processes of Symbolisation in Dramatic Discourse*, Papazisis, Athens, 2012

4 For further reading on Pinter, see Tsamouri (2009), available at: https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/18806 (Accessed:).

Heterotopic space, or heterotopia, refers to a real space that simultaneously functions as a space of otherness—both isolated and permeable. Access to a heterotopia is not straightforward. Michel Foucault (1984) argues that entry into such spaces occurs either through coercion (as in prisons) or through participation in rituals of purification. As an example, he refers to the Muslim hammam, where entry requires both religious and hygienic purification. A fundamental characteristic of a heterotopia is that it constitutes a space in which the dominant norms of human behaviour are suspended. An example here is the prison, which, according to the French philosopher, constitutes a heterotopia of deviation—that is, a space in which deviant behaviours are enacted. Utopia, in contrast, is a non-place, or *ou-topos*. A utopia represents a position without an actual physical location. It expresses society itself—since it cannot exist outside social contexts—while simultaneously retaining the element of perfection and balance[5].

Chapter 1. The Room

Among post-war English dramatists, Harold Pinter achieved the greatest international recognition. He began his career as an actor before turning to playwriting. Although his works differ in many respects, they share certain common characteristics (Brockett and Hildy, 2003). His central themes revolve around everyday situations that gradually acquire an atmosphere of mystery, threat, and obscure or ambiguous motivations[6].

His texts are based on abstract, often surreal situations, while his characters—deeply rooted in English identity—are engaged in everyday concerns. As a playwright, Pinter stands between Samuel Beckett and Anton Chekhov. Like Beckett, he strips his characters bare, leaving them to confront their anxieties and impasses within a mysterious universe[7]. Following Chekhov's tradition, Pinter constructs a highly realistic framework, with sharp dialogue marked by repetition and pauses. The rhythm, frequently interrupted by silences, conveys ambiguous meanings to the

5 M. Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces (Lecture at the Club of Architectural Studies)', *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, 5, October, 1984, pp. 46–49.

6 N. Hourmouziadis, 'Space and Terror', *Theatrika Tetradia*, 46, January, 2006

7 O. Brockett, *History of Theatre*, Vol. 3. Athens: KOAN, 2022

audience or reader. These elements led Martin Esslin to classify Pinter among the representatives of the Theatre of the Absurd[8].

Another recurring feature in Pinter's work is that the action often unfolds within a room. According to Kerr (1967)[9], the room constitutes a favoured scenic space in his dramaturgy. Within it, his characters find protection from the hostile external world. However, as Esslin (1968) suggests, the room is also a precarious refuge to which individuals cling. It resembles Beckett's bins, urns, or sacks—symbolising enclosure, confinement, and existential impasse.

In *The Room*, the central characters are Rose, a woman in her sixties, and her husband Bert. When Bert leaves to drive his van to work, a young couple arrives, hoping to speak with the landlord about renting a room. When they inform Rose that a man in the basement wishes to see her, she becomes deeply unsettled.

The basement represents a space outside the room—outside safety and protection. It embodies her hidden fears and anxieties, which had previously manifested in her obsessive concern with maintaining security. These fears now materialise when she is told that her room is to be rented out.

Her anxiety intensifies when Mr Kidd, the landlord, returns with the news that the man in the basement insists on seeing her:

Landlord: He's just down there… waiting.
Rose: Who?
Landlord: The man. Waiting to see you. He wants to see you… You must see him.
Rose: See me? Who is he?
Landlord: The man. He's downstairs now.
Rose: Who is he?

Rose speaks with the landlord, who explains that the man has been waiting all weekend in the basement to see her. The man, who is blind and Black, eventually comes upstairs and tells Rose that her father—who is dead—wants her to return home. Here we observe that Rose, like many Pinteresque characters, experiences a sense of metaphysical anxiety. She participates in an absurd situation which, though not incoherent, is intensely dramatic (Brockett and Hildy, 2003). Such scenes are characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd. Subsequently, Rose initially rejects the

8 P. Bozizio, *History of Theatre*, Vol. 1. Translated by E. Draklitsa, edited by A. Palaki. Athens: Aigokeros, 2010

9 W. Kerr, *Harold Pinter*, in R. Blanchard and J. Karr, (eds.) *Drama Criticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967

man's message, but soon she touches his face and head as if she were blind. Bert returns home and violently attacks the man, who lies motionless after Bert kicks his head into the stove. The play concludes with Rose realising that she can no longer see.

The room—as dramatic space in Pinter—is typically sparse, with a door beyond which lurks a cold, dangerous, and hostile world[10]. Rose is voluntarily confined within it—within her own utopia, as Michel Foucault might suggest. Her refusal to confront reality leads her to imagine an ideal order, resembling Foucault's notion of utopia. Utopia, or the 'non-place,' carries the characteristics of the ideal; it is pure and distinct[11]. A fundamental feature of utopia is the complete resolution of all issues that might concern us. The role that the room plays here is that of a refuge, protecting Rose from the outside world.

Rose: This room is all right for me… I haven't been outside. I wasn't too well… if they asked…

…You, Bert, I'm very happy where I am, we're very happy. We're all right. We're happy here…

we're not bothered, and nobody bothers us.[12]

Calmness, safety, and intimacy are the qualities that Rose's room exudes. These are almost identical to what Merleau-Ponty (2005) describes when referring to his own apartment. For the French philosopher, his apartment is a space that radiates intimacy and tranquility, and is not merely a measurable entity. It also represents a collection of lived experiences that come to life and are perceived through sensory qualities such as the light, sound, and colors present or entering the apartment[13].

This artificial calm that Rose experiences in her apartment is disrupted by intruders—a young couple, the caretaker, and a blind man—who disturb her sense of peace. This intrusion, this external force that comes to unsettle the interior and displace the room's occupant, is characteristic of Pinter's writing. Likewise, his

10 M. Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright,* London, Methuen, 2000 (Originally published 1972)

11 M. Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, London, Routledge, 2008 (Originally published 1967).

12 H. Pinter, *The Room: One*, Revised edition, London, Methuen, 1957

13 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Translated by S. Colin, London, Routledge Classics, Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005

characters often confront external invasions—events that compel them to leave the safety of their rooms and face situations akin to death[14].

Chapter 2. The Birthday Party

The play was written in 1958 and constitutes the author's first three-act work. The space in which the action unfolds is, once again, a room. The central character is Stanley, a man who hides in a room in a provincial boarding house in order to escape his persecutors, the anonymous figures of a secret organization. Eventually, his persecutors invade the room. After interrogating and torturing him throughout the night, they ultimately abduct him. The play ends with the sound of a car driving away.

As in *The Room*, space initially appears to function as a refuge for Stanley from external threatening forces; however, this function collapses when his torturers invade it.

Following the invasion, the room is transformed into a prison[15], a space of torture, or alternatively, a space of punitive confinement. A space that functions simultaneously as a courtroom and a site of punishment. Thus, the room in *The Birthday Party*, from a semiotic perspective, reveals the dialectics of this space in relation to the codes employed by the characters (here, Stanley's torturers) at the level of symbols[16].

The Pinteresque room in *The Birthday Party* can be interpreted as a field of articulation of power discourse. It is a space in which the agents of power—the intruders—operate. As Harold Pinter himself later noted in a letter to Wood, the director of the play's first production, these figures represent the System. In later interpretations, they have also been associated with the torturers of the German Gestapo, while Stanley symbolises the persecuted Jewish population (Gussow, 1994)[17].

The perpetrators thus invade the space and exercise the most extreme form of power over Stanley. They torture and punish him, depriving him of his freedom—a

14 K. Morison, *Pinter and the New Irony*, in R. Blanchard, and J. Karr (eds.), *Drama Criticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1969

15 M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* Athens, Rappa, 2005

16 D. Kosmopoulou, *The Dialectics of Space and Confinement in Theatre*, Athens, Dromon, 2018

17 M. Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter*, London, Nick Hern Books, 1994

process achieved through his confinement within the room, which has now been transformed from a refuge into a prison. In this way, the spatial function of the room changes: it becomes a site of discipline, repression, and control.

The organised invasion and assault on Stanley's body and identity, aimed at his subjugation, can be interpreted—through the lens of Michel Foucault's thought—as an expression of the collective and structured nature of modern disciplinary institutions, which seek the isolation, surveillance, and individualised regulation of the modern subject[18].

Chapter 3. The Caretaker

The Caretaker was first performed in 1960. It is the story of two brothers, Aston and Mick, and a caretaker named Davies. Aston takes in a homeless man, Davies, from the streets of London, offering him shelter in the room he shares with his brother Mick and appointing him as a caretaker. Over time, Davies attempts to displace Aston from the room and, in order to achieve this, aligns himself with Mick. The play concludes with Davies pleading for Aston's favour, as his attempt to marginalise him ultimately fails.

The scenic space here is, once again, a room—a familiar setting in Pinter's plays. However, unlike in earlier works, this room is not empty but cluttered with scattered objects of questionable utility—items that are worn out and obsolete. The world of these dispersed and disorderly arranged objects constructs an environment of threat and disarray, which differs significantly from the space of safety and tranquillity presented in earlier plays such as *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*.

The interpretation proposed by Begley (2005)[19] suggests that the room in *The Caretaker* signifies a form of resistance to consumerism and the commodified culture of modernism in post-war Europe of the 1950s.

However, the room here is also subject to invasion. The intruder seeks to expel the owner and take full possession of the space. In this sense, Davies attempts something similar to what Lopakhin does in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*:

18 M.Foucault, *Disciplinary Power and Subjection*, in *The Microphysics of Power*, Translated by L. Troulinou, Athens, Ypsilon, 1991

19 V. Begley, *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005

to acquire ownership. The difference, however, is that Davies seeks to achieve this through covert and manipulative means—by aligning himself with the owner's brother—which renders him a particularly dangerous figure. This desire to appropriate the good of shelter constitutes a characteristic example of the confinement of property (Kosmopoulou, 2018).

Thus, the three characters of the play are, in essence, confined within a single space. However, they do not appear entirely isolated. Aston interacts with the external world and the broader social environment—indeed, it is through this interaction that he encounters Davies. Ultimately, the room in *The Caretaker* becomes a field of conflict among three individuals who lay claim to it, resulting in the eventual expulsion of one of them.

Conclusions

The present study aimed to examine and critically discuss scenic and dramatic space in selected works by the English playwright Harold Pinter.

From the study, it became evident that the room functions as a common stage space in the works of the English playwright. It is a space that behaves differently in order to serve the author's purpose of conveying the meanings he seeks to construct. Thus, the Pinteresque room sometimes operates as a refuge, protecting the characters from external threats and dangers. It represents a utopia—an idyllic, untainted place that fills its inhabitants with a sense of optimism, as is the case with Rose in *The Room*.

In another instance, the room is interpreted as a heterotopia—a real and concrete place that, however, acquires different meanings depending on the actions and behavior of the characters operating within it. For example, Aston's room in *The Birthday Party* initially functions as a small refuge but later transforms into a space for the exercise of power—a site of punishment, torture, and discipline. Moreover, it also functions as property, as a dwelling—as demonstrated in the analysis of *The Caretaker*—or more accurately, as an object of contestation that ultimately becomes the locus of conflict among the protagonists, culminating in the final act of the play with the expulsion of one of the three claimants.

Bibliography:

Begley, V., *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005

Bozzisio, P., *History of the Theatre. Volume I*. Translated by E. Draklitsa, edited by A. Palaki, Athens, Aigokeros, 2010

Brockett, O., *History of the Theatre. Volume III*, Athens, KOAN, 2022
Chourmouziadis, N., 'Space and Terror', *Theatrika Tetradia*, 46, 2006
Esslin, M., *Pinter the Playwright*. London, Methuen, 2000 [1972]
Foucault, M., 'Disciplinary Power and Subjection', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, Translated by L. Troulinou, Athens, Ypsilon, 1991
Foucault, M., *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Athens, Rappa, 2005
Foucault, M., *Of Other Spaces*, London, Routledge, 2008 [1967]
Gussow, M., *Conversations with Pinter*, London, Nick Hern Books, 1994
Kerr, W., 'Harold Pinter', in Blanchard, R. and Karr, J. (eds.) *Drama Criticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1967
Kosmopoulou, D., *The Dialectics of Space and Confinement in Theatre*, Athens, Dromon, 2018
Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, Translated by C. Smith, London, Routledge Classics, 2005
Morison, K. , 'Pinter and the New Irony', in Blanchard, A. and Karr, J. (eds.) *Drama Criticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1969
Pavis, P., *Dictionary of the Theatre*. Translated by A. Stroubouli, edited by C.K. Georgousopoulos, Athens, Gutenberg, 2006
Pefanis, G., *Theatre and Symbols: Processes of Symbolisation in Dramatic Discourse*, Athens, Papazisis, 2012
Pinter, H., *The Room*. London, Methuen, 1957
Tsamouri, *Writing for the Stage and the Screen: A Phenomenological Quest in Harold Pinter's Theatrical and Filmic Work*, PhD thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Available at: https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/18806 (Accessed:) 2009
Ubersfeld, A., *Reading Theatre*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999