

Absurdity underneath realistic elements in Pinter's

The Dumb Waiter

L'ABSURDITÉ CACHÉE ET LES ÉLÉMENTS RÉALISTES DANS *LE SERVEUR MUET* DE PINTER

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Abstract: This paper is a study on the absurdity underneath the realistic factors in Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*. Through analyzing the realistic elements in *The Dumb Waiter*'s setting, plot and characterization respectively, this paper attempts to prove that despite these realistic aspects, the overall effect of the play is one of uncertainty and absurdity.

Key words: *The Dumb Waiter*, realism, absurdity

Résumé: L'article présente et étudie principalement l'utilisation des éléments réalistes et l'absurdité cachée sous l'apparence réaliste dans la pièce d'Harold Pinter- *Le Serveur muet*. À travers l'interprétation de cette pièce, l'auteur croit que, malgré l'utilisation du système du théâtre réaliste traditionnel dans l'agencement du contexte, la structure de l'intrigue et la description des personnages, cette pièce exprime, du point de vue plus profond, l'absurdité de la condition humaine ainsi que l'isolement et la solitude entre les êtres.

Mots-Clés: *Le Serveur muet*, réalisme, absurdité

1. INTRODUCTION

The opening page of the Pinter website carries a dictum of his from 1958: "There are no hard distinction between what is real and what is unreal, or between what is true and what is false." In fact, it's his ability to create a drama that is seemingly both realistic and expressionistic that provided further testimony to his greatness. *The Dumb Waiter*, one of Pinter's early plays, which was favorably reviewed, marks an important step forward in Pinter's style; here the realistic aspects are the beginning of the journey to the non-realistic essence of absurdity.

Since the late 1950s, Pinter's plays have been claimed as fine examples of absurdism. Especially after Martin Esslin in 1961 put Pinter in the same camp with Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov and Jean Genet in his famous book *The Theatre of The Absurd* (Esslin, 1968), Pinter has had been identified with the absurdist dramatist even till today. From then on, everyone who wants to study Pinter's plays inevitably discusses the absurd aspects in them.

As it came to the 1970s and 1980s, Pinter's plays have undergone feminist revision and been championed

for their meta-theatricality. Ann Hall compares representations of women in the plays of Pinter, Eugene O'neil, and Sam Shepard (Hall, 1993). And this trend of feminist approach is still pervading today. At the same time, study of Pinter's theatricality became more and more heated as Pinter's status in theatre became more and more stable and important. Martin Esslin's *Pinter: A Study of His Plays* (Esslin, 1977) is a full treatment of the plays based on the dual nature of Pinter's work. Both Bernard Dukore and Arnold Hinchliffe also published their books in study of Pinter's theatricality in 1980s.

From the last decade of 20th century till today, Pinter's plays have been either praised or vilified for their confrontational political incisiveness. Mac Silverstein's book *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power* (Silverstein, 1993) provides detailed analysis of language and politics in Pinter's play from the postmodern perspective.

Many critics think highly of the realistic elements in Pinter's plays and agree that the blending of realism and absurdism is one important aspect of Pinter's innovative theatrical style. Martin Esslin sees the paradox of Pinter's artistic personality lies in the realistic and the unrealistic, especially the absurdist. He observes that realistic components compose the unrealistic whole of Pinter's plays, "the dialogue and the characters are real,

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but the over-all effect is one of mystery, of uncertainty, of poetic ambiguity" (Esslin, 1977). Following Esslin, many critics continue to study Pinter's blending of absurdism and realism. James Hopis praises Pinter as the only playwright to fuse the absurdist consciousness with overtly conventional realism to achieve a dramatically viable amalgam.

However, there are some critics who deny its importance. As R. F. Storch says, Pinter's success partly is attributed by his breaking with the naturalistic conventions of drama bourgeois (Storch, 2001). Echoing with this, Alfred Richkert and Ronald Knowles both deny Pinter's relation to realism, especially social realism, for Pinter's aim is not didactic.

Though there are many critics who have touched upon the realistic side of Pinter's plays, as listed above and much more than that, few of them make ample analysis and provides some keys to understand it.

In this paper, the author will make a close study on *The Dumb Waiter*, focusing on the theme of absurdity conveyed through realistic elements in the play. The main body of this paper consists of three parts. Part One lists the realistic elements in the play—the concrete setting and characters, and the comparatively complete plot. Then Part Two makes an analysis of these realistic elements and uncovers the absurdity underneath them. Finally a conclusion comes to be drawn in Part Three.

2. REALISTIC ELEMENTS

In absurd plays, action and events are irrelevant and randomly put together, therefore the plot of absurd plays is illogical or even absent. *The Dumb Waiter* is quite different in that its plot is comparatively complete; its characters have the concrete nature.

2.1 Setting

In the play, the action is set within a basement room, and contained in no more than twenty four hours. In addition, the realistic style of props and stage directions further stress his linking with traditional realism.

In this confined space, Pinter mostly presents a realistic domestic setting such as its beginning:

"Scene: A basement room. Two beds, flat against the back wall. A serving hatch, closed, between the beds. A door to the kitchen and lavatory, left. A door to a passage, right." (*The Dumb Waiter*, 1960)

Here, the audience can see the room, the door, and the beds, all of which constitutes the basic layout of a domestic life.

To fulfill the audience's desire to identity, Pinter further stresses the "likeness to life" by using the stage

direction in a realistic way. The following stage direction brings the audience to the realistic daily life at the play's beginning:

"Gus ties his laces, rises, yawns and begins to walk slowly to the door, left. (...) Ben lowers his paper and watches him. Gus kneels and unties and his shoelaces and slowly takes off the shoe. He looks inside it and brings out a flattered matchbox. (...) Their eyes meet. Ben rattles his paper and reads."

(*The Dumb Waiter*, 1960)

With a series of repetitive actions, this is the exact recording of dull life of Gus and Ben, trivial but realistic.

2.2 Realistic Plot

The plot of the play is comparatively complete. From start to finish, the play strikes the audience with neat story lines, different from the static and reversal structure which characterizes absurd drama. *The Dumb Waiter* begins with two working-class Cockneys, Gus and Ben, who spend a morning in a basement bedroom in Birmingham waiting for instructions from their boss. They later proved to be two professional killers. Soon it is discovered that the basement was a restaurant kitchen for one time, for without warning a dumb waiter at the back begins to work. At the end of the play, Ben gets the order to kill Gus.

Furthermore, on the whole the play is progressive. The plot of *The Dumb Waiter* is well structured, though does not necessarily follow a traditional format of exposition, development, climax and denouement. It provides not much about exposition and ends soon after the arrival of the climax. Ronald Knowles once makes a comment that Pinter's play has the conventional pattern of arrival-disruption-departure. (Knowles, 2001) Kenneth Pickering describes as follows:

"A group of people in a lifelike setting are in some way disturbed either by the arrival of a new character or by some unexpected occurrence; the characters are forced to regroup to bring about a satisfactory end." (Pickering, 2003)

Both Knowles and Pickering's ideas are applicable to the play. In *The Dumb Waiter*, the relationship between Gus and Ben becomes intensified with the appearance of the dumb waiter, accompanied by a series of orders for food; Ben obeys the orders willingly but Gus refuses and complains. Near the end of the play, Ben gets an additional order: to shoot the next person to come in through the outside door. When Gus enters through that door, Ben faces him, gun in hand: the play ends with the regrouping of these two killers.

2.3 Character

As Hollis observes, Pinter does not dehumanize his characters as Beckett and Ionesco sometimes do but leave them “human, all-too-human.”(Hollis, 1970) The characters in the play, Gus and Ben, are not as static, eccentric and inhuman as characters in other absurdist plays, but rather real, common and human. Rather, we can dictate human nature in both Gus and Ben. Gus keeps asking questions and complaining, which shows his inquisitiveness and awareness of his imprisoned state. He shivers out of fear and pity when he thinks about killing a girl and gets impatient and infuriated as he waits long for the instructions from the boss. Compared with Gus, Ben seems to be calm and self-important, regarding himself as a “qualified” professional killer. Seemingly cruel and calm, he also exhibits hesitation as he shoots at Gus at the end of the play.

A lower-class criminal, Ben is concerned with his standing. His profound shame over his class emerges in interactions with those upstairs via the dumb waiter, and much of this shame is tied to language. The food orders from the dumb waiter are for increasingly exotic foods with unfamiliar names, and Ben pretends to know how to make them only to a point. Ben also happily reports that the man upstairs, presumably of higher social standing, uses the same debated phrase—“Light the kettle”—as he does, and he warns Gus to observe decorum when talking to the upstairs, as he demonstrates with his formal apology.

3. ABSURDITY UNDERNEATH REALISTIC ELEMENTS

Pinter believes that the deepest terrors, the profoundest mysteries, hover in and around the most realistic looking of details. Analyzing this play, the author finds that beneath the surface reality of his work, Pinter conveys the basic themes of the Theatre of the Absurd—the absurdity of the human condition, which is demonstrated in the universal menace human beings facing, uncertainty about the world and oneself, and the alienation of the human relationship.

3.1 Universal menace outside and inside the room

Some critics hold that in Pinter’s plays, the room becomes an image of the small area of light and warmth that our consciousness opens up in the vast ocean of nothingness and outside is a world full of menace, dread and mystery. (劉明正,1988) The author thinks that this is partly applicable to *The Dumb Waiter*, because there is menace both outside and inside the room.

However, threat and menace also exist inside of the room in the play. For instance, newspaper held by Ben appears twice in the play, and the news items on it consist of the background of the play. At the beginning, Ben continually reads to Gus the news on the paper, which is quite bloody and violent. Near the end of the play, Ben again picks up paper and reads just before the arrival of another bloody incident—killing Gus. The newspaper—one of the props on the stage—fills the whole play with the air of dread and mystery. (劉明正,1988)

Yet the greater threat comes from the two characters themselves. It is easy for the audience to find that both are in different ways extremely lonely. They should have trusted, loved and helped each other, and in that case, they would not feel so lonely. However, it can be found Ben does not trust Gus from the very beginning: he keeps watch on Gus. As times goes on, he even guessed his next target could be his partner.

3.2 Uncertainty

On the whole, the play follows the traditional realist structure and has a considerably integrated plot, but in detail they are too much out of this convention.

Pinter has more interest in uncertainty and ambiguity. His plot is not narrative of an organic story. In other words, the audiences know what happens in the play but fail to know why it happens. For instance, Pinter does not explain why Gus is stripped of his clothes and revolver at the end of the play. The audience does not know why it takes a long time for the lavatory to flush, or why an envelope with matches inside is sent from behind the door of the basement room. Moreover, Pinter does not tell the audience why Ben gets his boss’s instruction from the speaking tube on the wall. Pinter’s deliberate avoidance of providing any reasonable information makes the audience confused but at the same time creates the air of uncertainty for the play. Because events and actions are unexplained, and apparently illogical or unmotivated, the world seems uncertain or malevolent.

The audience can also sense the uncertainty of identity from the two characters, Ben and Gus. These two professional killers have killed so many people to count. Yet they do not know who they have killed, nor they are to kill, neither do they know who has been instructing them. They seem to gain dominance over their victims, but, at the same time, they have to take orders from their boss who never makes his appearance throughout the play. What they can do in the play is simply waiting for the order. They seem to be important and powerful, but actually not.

3.3 The alienation of the human relationship

The newspaper and the room, two important images in the play, reveal a clearly defined view of human relationships. As Ruby Cohn says, the props within each Pinter's room seem to be realistically functional and only in retrospect they require symbolic significance. (Cohn, 2001) First, the newspaper in Ben's hands represents the alienation between the two characters. The paper appears twice. The first is at the beginning and the second at the end. From the stage directions at the start, the audience can find Ben actually does not focus on the paper, but on Gus. He "lowers his paper and watches" Gus several times. (*The Dumb Waiter*, 1960) Whenever their eyes meet, he will rattle his paper and pretends to read. Newspaper here functions as the excuse Ben adopts to evade any communication with Gus. Second, the life of Ben and Gus is full of waitings for instructions from their boss. They move from one city to another, from one room to another with little contact with other people. They can not even see "what it looks like outside" because the room they are in have no windows. (*The Dumb Waiter*, 1960) To some extent, they are imprisoned in their dull routine and separated from other people.

Moreover, disconnection is the essence of their relationship. The play is filled with everyday small talk between Gus and Ben, but they never have a fully open dialogue—minimized even more by Ben's knowledge of his impending betrayal of Gus—and whenever Gus tries to bring up something emotional, Ben refuses to speak with him. They do not speak with, but to each other. Pinter is perceptive about our inability to communicate genuinely, and this comes through in his concern with empty dialogue—the games people play to avoid straight talk about their relationships and problems.

It is true that the play is filled with realistic contemporary dialogue. However, words in the play, become weapons of domination and subservience, so that the characters strike with word or fence with phrases. For example, the failure—on the part of Gus and

Ben—to understand the workings of their organization, their frustration and irritation finds its expression in the dialogue. Again and again they become isolated in linguistic knots which they are unable to unravel: the famous exchange about whether one says "I'll light the kettle" or "I'll light the gas" is just one among many similarly funny and revealing passages.

4. CONCLUSION

Among the group of young talented playwrights since the Restoration, Harold Pinter is in many ways different, and his work is seen to stand apart from other playwrights of his age. He tried to break up with the standard theatrical farce that had been predominant on the English commercial stage in the 1940s and 1950s.

What is most striking in his plays is his brilliant and amazing talent displayed in

the extreme accuracy of images from reality and the observation of surface detail. The range of such a work may appear narrow; and as a mere representation of external reality it may seem extremely simple. Yet analyzing his plays we can find its potential to express the inexpressible, to transcend the scope of language itself and to evoke a response at the deepest level of direct communication of emotion and experience. This is the magic of Pinter's plays to some critics and the puzzle of his plays to others. Pinter ranks undoubtedly before the others, because he is regarded "as a craftsman, a master of dialogue, a technician of suspense, laughter, surprise and emotion; and as an artist who as a true poet of the stage has created his own personal world in his own personal idiom, wholly consistent, wholly individual, an expression of his own anguish peopled from his wound, which yet, as great poetry always does, re-echoes in the depths of the minds of a multitude of individuals and is capable of giving voice to unspoken fears, sufferings and yearnings shared by all mankind." (Esslin, 1977)

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