

The Dramatic Function of Silence in Harold Pinter's

The Dumb Waiter

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Harold Pinter is one of the prime pioneers of a dramatic trend that constituted a revolt against the earlier dramatic mainstream. "It is a trend in contemporary theatre, and Pinter is its English representative, and it is the trend that has most to say and do in the so-called revival of the British theatre."¹

One thing important about Pinter is the fact that his dramatic works have been subjected to great deal of argument, and it is not an effortless task to put into more generalized terms what is general and what's specific or particular in his works. W. H. Free states that "Harold Pinter's plays still puzzle audiences and critics after almost a dozen years of acquaintance with his work"²

The atmosphere that wraps his characters has justified or legitimized a more symbolic interpretation on the part of critics of Pinter's characters. Yet, Pinter affirms that he never uses any abstract ideas. That is why he affirms "When a character cannot be comfortably defined or understood in terms of the familiar, the tendency is to perch him on a symbolic shelf."³

Therefore, an exceptional burden is placed on the audience who is required to figure out something of the presented experience on stage. According to J.R.Taylor, Pinter deliberately employs a pervasive atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty. "The technique of casting doubt upon everything...is one which we shall find used constantly in Pinter's plays to create an air of mystery and uncertainty."⁴

The purpose of this atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty is not to put the audience in a restless ambiance of confusion, but it is a thematic reflection of a play that deals with certain negotiable conceptions and ideas like reality and truth. To Pinter, such concepts are relative rather than absolute and their acknowledgment depends on the character's perception of such ideas. This requires, on the part of the audience, a considerable understanding of the experience that is performed on stage and of the structure of the play which naturally helps in the clarification of the character's experience.

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The audience is required to pay a considerable attention not only to the significance of what any character says, but also to the connection between the utterances of all characters as "the trivial topics become the instruments and focus of issues that anything but trivial."⁵

In presenting his ideas, themes and characters, Pinter is not away from being influenced by contemporary writers, specifically Samuel Beckett. Pinter states that:

There is no question that Beckett is a writer who I admire very much....If Beckett's influence shows in my work that is all right with me. You don't write in vacuum; you're bound to absorb and digest other writing and I admire Beckett's work so much that something of its texture might appear in my own.⁶

Like Beckett, Pinter is concerned with humanity and its necessities. He is not interested in Man's relation to the landscape or the environment, but his interest is in the mutual experiences that human beings might share with each other. He is interested in pain and despair; the resentment that characters feel about the absurdity of life." Pinter's plays are commentary on that reasonable expectation and observation on its lack of fulfillment."⁷ Pinter is not after presenting abstract issues on the symbolic level, but he is more concerned with negotiating certain extraordinary questions and ultimates. His focus seems to be, at first, on minor details and experiences that might take place amongst ordinary people, ending with the hidden emotional tumult related to personal conflicts. To him, "Loneliness and despair are immediate problems resulting from unhappy experiences with family, friends, and job rather than the consequences of one's metaphysical discomforts"⁸

Being concerned with the problems of human identity and incentives, this concern has led to a kind of mystification which contradicts with the usual and conventional exposition in drama. The unconventional way of exposing or presenting Pinter's characters requires withholding certain information from the audience who must be aware of the complexity of the situation exposed. This

unusual presentation justifies the unusual and typical situation in Pinter's early dramas; of which Pinter states:

Given a man in a room and he will sooner or later receive a visitor. A visitor entering the room will enter with intent. If two people inhabit the room; the visitor will not be the same man for both. A man in the room who receives a visit is likely to be illuminated or horrified by it.

We all have our function ... The desire for verification is understandable but cannot be always satisfied. There are no hard distinction between what's unreal, or between what's true and is false.

A character on the stage that can present no Convincing argument or information as to his part experience, his present behavior, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as a legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who can do all these things.⁹

To Pinter there is always a kind of an indistinct intrusion that threatens Man's life; this intrusion might take the shape of another human being whose identity and past need to be clarified, not only by the audience, but by the other characters.

Accordingly, Pinter is hardly acquainted with his character's emotions and behaviors and this lack of acquaintance leads to the uncertainty which must be communicated to the audience who needs to feel it to recognize the fact that "we hardly get more than that in real life."¹⁰ This does not mean that the playwright leaves the characters loose and uncontrolled. To Pinter, the task of the playwright is to select and arrange the characters and to give them a calculated space of freedom to communicate to each other and consequently to

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the audience. The vehicle the characters use to communicate is the language that must be carefully examined or checked in order to appear as much realistic as possible to be more convincing.

To Pinter, the daily habits and experiences manifested in the daily conversations that people might share cannot be interpreted on a more effortless and innocent intensities. Rather, Pinter believes that beneath the spoken word there's the unheard or the silent that holds some expressive, sensual and sometimes violent inclinations which constitute Man's existent motivations.

This belief has justified the disintegration of the language used in Pinter's plays. This disintegration of language mirrors different kinds of internal impulses that constitute Man's behavior, and consequently it is the unsurpassed procedure of expressing the dramatic strain. Pinter expresses the importance of how people can control words and the impact of silence by saying that "the speech we hear is an indication of that we don't hear.... When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer to nakedness."¹¹ To Pinter, silence is a form of a response.

Pinter holds the view that the job of the playwright is to be thoughtful enough to reach the justified balance between (when to make the character speak and when to stop), between silence and articulation. He states that "Given characters who possess a momentum of their own, my job is not to impose on them, by which I mean forcing a character to speak where he could not speak."¹² Addressing the playwright, he affirms:

You arrange and you listen, following the clues
you leave for yourself through the characters.
And sometimes a balance is found, where image
can freely engender image and where at the same
time you are able to keep your sights on the place
where the characters are silent and in hiding. It is in
the Silence they are most evident to me¹³

Therefore, silence to Pinter is an integral part, and consequently the culmination of his use of language. "The Silence that is a refusal to communicate is one of the dominant images of Pinter's plays"¹⁴

One way of conveying the idea that real people in real life situations often use more silence and longer pauses is the extensive employment of silence in his plays, more than it is allowed in a conventional dramatic work. Pinter refers to two kinds of silences: a real silence when there's no utterance of a dialogue, and another to expressive silence that represents state of "nakedness" or vacuum:

The speech we hear is an indication of what we don't hear... When silence falls we still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech his to say it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness¹⁵

So, the speech that's said is an intimation of what's not said.

At the outset of **The Dumb Waiter**, silence is frequently used to emphasize a kind of discrimination between the two characters, and to indicate a lack of communication between Ben and Gus due to the superiority of Ben over Gus. Ben at the beginning is presented reading a newspaper in which he recites a story:

Ben: A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic. See? He could not see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.¹⁶

The story serves as a play within the play to emphasize the fact that Ben's character is the initiative and domineering one, while Gus' on the other hand seems to be inferior ,committing himself to the role of being a recipient who's making incredulous comments. Yet, when Ben finishes reading the story in the paper, silence overwhelms again as if the two characters are wandering in an empty circle.

Ben: A man of eighty seven crawling under a lorry!

Gus: It's unbelievable .

Ben : It's down here in black and white.

Gus: Incredible.

Silence

(p.130)

Gus wants in the following part to take the imitative by making certain comments about making tea and about tea cups and their shapes and colures ,yet he fails to attract Ben' attention who is ignorant disinterested, busying himself in reading the paper. Gus is presented in away to establish the impression that he constitutes a burden to Ben.

Ben: Well, make the tea will you?

.....

Gus: I wanted to ask you something?

Ben.(slamming his newspaper down). Kaw!

Gus: What's that ?

Ben : A child of eight killed a cat !

Gus: Get away.

.....

Ben : That's bloody ridiculous.

(pp.131-132)

As Ben recites another story in the paper about a boy who kills a cat blaming it on his sister, Gus rises showing his impatience of waiting as he wants to get the job done as soon as possible. Ironically, Gus himself is the mark of the next job.

Gus : What time is he getting in touch?

Ben reads

What time is he getting in touch ?

Ben: What's the matter with you? It could be any time.

Any time.

(p.132)

Gus shows explicitly his disgust of their way of living .He expresses an eagerness to live a life of an ordinary human being going through the ordinary and usual experiences of everyday life. “Ben is the tough guy only on the surface, because it never occurs to him to question his job”¹⁷ Explicitly, Gus seems to be the one whose job is to take other people's lives, but implicitly he is the one who's been deprived of his life. So, he turns out to be a victim rather than a victimizer.

Gus: I wouldn't like to live in this dump. I wouldn't mind
If you had a window. You could see what it looked
Like outside.

.....
Well, I like to have a bit of a view.

.....
I mean you come into a place when it is still dark,
you come into a room you've never seen before
you sleep all day, you do your job, and then you
go away in the night again.

(pp.133-134)

Ben's response to Gus's complaints considering the inadequate timing of the organization, and the dissatisfactory working conditions is quite ironic.

Ben: You kill me. Any one would think you're working
everyday. How often do we do a job? Once a week?
What are you complaining about? (p.134)

Consequently, there are two different view points contradicting and confronting each other. Ben's view that supports the idea of waiting dumbly for the job without making any complaints, and Gus's view that refuses to be a "dumb waiter" which eventually would cost him his life. Ben accuses Gus of being disinterested in anything and this, according to Ben, is the main reason behind Gus's dissatisfaction.

Ben: You haven't got any interests.

Gus: I've got interests

.....

Don't you ever get a bit fed up ?

Ben: Fed up ? With what?

Silence

(p.134)

The argument ends with silence. Gus's refusal to confirm or to deny any fact is of significant dramatic impact. Together with confirming the idea of the superiority of Ben's character who seems to be more practical and rational than Gus, Pinter, with a great deal of economy, leaves the answer of Ben's question to the audience to establish or emphasize the impression that the play is moving towards a death forfeit, specifically Gus's death, who starts to complain and to question the validity of the system whose authority should not be negotiated or questioned.

Gus : He does not seem to bother much about our
comfort these days ? (p.135)

Gus starts to be suspicious as far as Ben's intentions. He asked Ben about stopping the car on their way to this place and Gus's reply is also ironic:

Gus : Why did you stop the car this morning in
the middle of the road?

Ben: I thought you were a sleep.

Gus : I was...but you were sitting up dead straight
Like you were waiting for something. (p.135)

Actually, both of them are waiting. Gus, ironically describes Ben of waiting dumbly for something while Gus also has to wait for something that is quite different.

The anxiety that dominates the atmosphere of the play from the beginning is eased now. After several complaints made by Gus about flushing the toilet and the dirty sheets, an abrupt intrusion happens which constitutes a typical Pinter's situation. Talking about football and ball games, an envelope slides under the door. The envelope contains matches that will be used to "light the kettle" or "to put on the kettle" to make tea. The tension also rises in the argument between Ben and Gus over the phrase "light the kettle" and whether it "is more correct than "put on the kettle

Despite the fact that Gus seems to be initiative and is about to win a victory over the dispute, but Gus's triumph seems to be temporary.

Ben: Who's is the senior partner here, me or you?

Gus: You.

.....
Ben: Nobody says light the gas! What does the gas light?

Gus: What does the gas light-?

Ben: The kettle you fool.

Gus: All right, all right. (p. 142)

Gus is quite submissive as if he's participating effectively in the preparation of the death ritual set, ironically, for him: The discussion ends with Ben ordering Gus to: "Put on the kettle for Christ's sake." and Gus's ironic reply:

I wonder who it will be tonight?

Silence (p.143)

Silence is also used to instigate the audience's awareness of the ironic question and their awareness of the answer.

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The tension rises and the death ritual proceeds. Gus is seen asking question and Ben, in the way he answers Gun, still assumes his commanding position:

Gus: I was going to ask you something
Ben: What are you sitting on my bed for?
.....
What's the matter with you? You're
always asking me questions
.....
You never used to ask me so many damn
questions (p.143)

Yet, Gus, being under the influence of a suspicious personality, and being the insecure partner keeps on asking the ironic question about the identity of the next victim:

Gus: Who it's going to be ?
Silence (p.144)

Silence is employed as a motif to emphasize the idea, although inexplicitly, that the victim and the victor can change roles. Gus seems to be the more insecure partner as he frequently asks questions considering their way of living. Ben, who becomes upset with Gus's questions, seems to be more stable and content as it never occurs to him to question his job. Yet, Ben's stability and his assumed satisfaction are on the surface only.

This assumed satisfaction with his job is threatened when Gus reminds him with their last contract. Gus's sense of insecurity is manifested in his eagerness to meet their boss:

Gus: There are a number of things I want to ask him
But I can never get around to it, when I see him
I've been thinking about the last one.
Ben: What last one ?

Gus: That girl.

Gus: How many times have read that paper?

Ben(angrily): What do you mean?

.....
What are you doing ,criticizing me? (p.144)

Ben, when he's reminded with their last murder, he avoids the issue pretending that he's reading the paper. Being guilt-ridden they share the same inexplicit sense of insecurity that might be cultivated and increased by a threat that might take the form of an unknown hostile force.

Pinter has succeeded in making equilibrium between the explicit discrepancies of his characters and the inexplicit feature that unites them: insecurity. The unknown menace that interrupts abruptly in the play takes the shape of a "dumb waiter" that reverberates down bringing unusual food orders. According to Walter Kerr," Pinter achieves his affect of terror in the play because the terror is nameless; the hostile force is not identified"¹⁸ The "dumb waiter" reverberates up and down again bringing orders. In a sense, the ominous presence of Wilson is the most dominating silence in the play. Assuming Wilson is the one sending the men messages through the dumb waiter and the speaking tube, this mysteriousness is one of the more disturbing components of the play, for Wilson seems to be everywhere through his organization. Wilson is a malicious figure whom the characters wait for in violent silence. . He executes a function resembling that of Godot in Beckett's **Waiting for Godot**, but whereas Godot signifies a dispassionate figure for which the characters wait, Wilson, on the other hand is a malicious figure that the characters wait for in violent silence. "A play like Pinter's **The Dumb Waiter** reflects quite directly and identifiably the methods and even the rhythms of Beckett."¹⁹

Pinter wants to establish the impression that Ben and Gus are two men who serve an unseen boss from above who gives explicit orders, yet his identity is still inexplicit and mysterious. In a more generalized sense, Pinter wants the audience to be aware of his idea of an intrusion of mysterious threat that might threaten Man's feeling of being secure. The "dumb waiter" represents the

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system. The gunman who questions the validity of the system, and shows his discomfort that their last victim is a woman, must be eliminated if the system is to carry on. "Directly, the comic play proceeds to a point where comedy stops and death become imminent"²⁰

Gus: We've never let him down though, have we ?

.....
We're reliable , aren't we ?

.....
I'm feeling a bit off. I've got a splitting head ache

Silence

(p.146)

Silence here is to formulate the impression that a decision has been made. The silence is cut when the "dumb waiter" descends bringing more orders of food.

Being fed up with the whole situation, Gus starts shouting due to his feeling that there's a superior power that manipulates and controls everything around them. Eventually, Ben receives his final order to get the job done.

Gus stumbles in
He is stripped of his jacket, waist coat, tie, holster
and revolver

.....
He raises his head and looks at Ben.
A long silence

The play starts and ends with the same motif; silence.

Pinter has used silence-filled pauses to achieve certain theatrical outcome. Ben's most prominent response to Gus's constant questions about the nature of their jobs is silence. Beneath this silence is always the threat of violence, the expectation of an imminent death ritual—the play ends as Ben trains his gun on Gus in silence. The language itself is also tinged with violence, especially when the topic is something seemingly trivial. The men's argument over the phrase "Light the kettle" is filled with Ben's barbs that intimidate and shame Gus. Moreover, when Ben screams "THE KETTLE, YOU

FOOL!" and chokes Gus, one gets the feeling that his words are intertwined with the act of physical violence.

Something vital to consider Pinter's plays is to appreciate the temperament of silence. Pinter "categorized speech as that which attempts to cover the nakedness of silence." In **The Dumbwaiter**, the breakdown of human communication has been often emphasized. From the outset, this idea has been presented by utilizing silence. The dumb-waiter itself is another silent character that symbolizes disentanglement in human communication. "There has been much loose and confused comment on Pinter's plays as being concerned with the impossibility of communication."²¹ Pinter is quite innovative in the sense that no dramatist with the belief of the impossibility of communication would write plays to an audience.

In **The Dumb Waiter**, nothing is achieved through dialogue. This is quite evident in the futile conversations and the internal strife that makes up the play. On the other hand, free motivation and self-control is not used, except in irrelevant choices as if the dialogue is meant for passing time. The Majority of discussions that take place between Ben and Gus are useless, and each character has difficulty dealing with the other, character, and consequently, dealing with society. As a result, the audience is required to contemplate society's responsibility in this. Pinter uses silence in this play profoundly, to generate expectation and a mood of restlessness. Thus a feeling of threat is more important to direct action, together with an intimation of violence.

NOTES

¹ Arnold P. Hinchliff, **Harold Pinter**. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967) P.21).

² W.J.Free in Austen E. Quigley, **The Pinter Problem**. (Princeton, N. J: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), P.3

³ Pinter, in Austen E. Quigley, P.8.

⁴ J.R.Taylor, **Anger and After** (Middlesex, 1968.P.287)

⁵ Austen E.Quigley, P.73.

⁶ Pinter in Arnold P.Hinchliffe, P.33.

⁷ Arnold Hinchliffe, P.37.

⁸ Lois G.Gorden, **Strategems to Uncover Nakedness**, (Missouri: University of Missouri: Press, 1969) P.3.

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- ⁹ Pinter, in Martin Esslin, **Pinter the Playwright** (London: Methuen 1977), P.44.
- ¹⁰ Martin Esslin, P.46.
- ¹¹ Lois G.Gorden,p.4.
- ¹² Pinter, in M.Esslin, P.49.
- ¹³ Ibid., P.49.
- ¹⁴ Arthur Ganz (ed.), **Pinter, A Collection of Essays** (NJ:Prentice Hall, Inc, 1972),p.57
- ¹⁵ Pinter in, Lois G.Gorden, P.4.
- ¹⁶ Harold Pinter, **Plays: The Dumb Waiter** (London: Eyre Methuen 1959), p.130.
- ¹⁷ Lois G.Gorden,p.31.
- ¹⁸ Walter Kerr, in Katherine H. Burkman, **The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis and Ritual**, (Ohio State University: 1971) P.41
- ¹⁹ Raymond Williams, **Drama from Ibsen to Eliot** (London: Chatto&Windus 1967),p.307
- ²⁰ BernardF.Dukore, **Where Laughter Stops, Pinter's Tragicomedy** (University of Missouri Press, 1976),p.21.
- ²¹ Gamini Salgado, **English Drama: A Critical Introduction** (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd , 1980),p.202

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