

Original Paper

An Interpretation of *The Dumb Waiter* from Foucault's Disciplinary Power Theory

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Abstract

*Harold Pinter is one of Britain's greatest playwrights in the 20th century. He is famous for his "Comedy of Menace" which discloses the menace theme in people's daily life and the power discipline and resistance behind the great menace. In the one-act play *The Dumb Waiter*, the subtle power struggles are revealed through the closed space, absurd dialogues and repetitive actions. Michel Foucault, one of the greatest French philosophies, points out that power occurs everywhere and it is related to body, knowledge and discourse. Thus this thesis attempts to explore the discipline punishment and resistance in the power struggle in *The Dumb Waiter*, and then reveal the plight of human being in the 20th century.*

Keywords

The Dumb Waiter; Disciplinary Power Theory; Foucault; discipline; resistance

1. Introduction

Harold Pinter is one of the most talented playwrights in the history of postwar British and even the world drama, famous for his "Comedy of Menace" which means the characters in the play always face the menace of some power from the outside world. Pinter won the Nobel Prize in literature in 2005. When announcing the award, the chairman proclaimed that Pinter was an artist "who in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms" ("Harold Pinter-Facts"). *The Dumb Waiter* is a one-act play finished in 1957 and presented in 1960. The whole play is set in a windowless, stuffy basement of an abandoned restaurant with two beds separated by a dumb waiter. Gus and Ben, the play's two characters, await instructions from their organization in the basement. As they waited endlessly, they engaged in a few discussions, chatting about tea. However, Gus soon began to annoy Ben by asking questions about their job. Later, they received messages through the dumb waiter in the room, which contained food orders. In the end of the play, the curtain falls as Gus and his

prospective murder Ben stared at each other. It is because he has not been content to be a “dumb waiter” that Gus is destroyed. Actually, both Gus and Ben are victims of power they strive for.

2. Literature Review

As one of Pinter’s the most renowned plays, *The Dumb Waiter* has been of great concern of scholars since its presentation. Various theories are employed in the interpretation of this play including existentialism, symbolism, deconstructionism theory and so on. Besides, many scholars analyze its political theme and characteristics of “Comedy of Menace” and “Absurd Theatre”.

At abroad, Ruby Cohn (1962), in his “The World of Harold Pinter”, analyzes the functions of house in Pinter’s four plays and demonstrates that the closed space signifies the virtual annihilation of the individual. Ali Zeeshan in “The Real and the Absurd in Harold Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*” states that “Behind the thick layer of absurdity in *The Dumb Waiter*, the real characters with internal fears depict the pathetic status of a powerless man in a menacing atmosphere. The characters’ futile struggle to protect themselves from their powerful master is rendered realistically.” (p. 89)

The domestic study of *The Dumb Waiter* is roughly divided into four aspects. Firstly, through the lens of Impoliteness Theory, Chen Yali (2011) offers a thorough examination of the power struggle between Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*, focusing on their damaged conversational structure. She discusses Ben’s preservation of power via Jonathan Culpeper’s politeness strategies, as well as his oppressive use of non-verbal impoliteness against Gus. Secondly, the perspective is menace and absurd. For example, Zhou Guanying (2011) distinguishes the type of threat represented in Pinter’s plays from those originating from weapons and bombs. The kind of threat he delves into penetrates deep into the human soul, inducing a shiver of fear. This is not merely an emotional device; it hints at the fate of mankind itself. Thirdly, the language style of *The Dumb Waiter* is researched by many scholars.

At last, some scholars focus on the study of power discipline and struggle in *The Dumb Waiter*. Zhao Ning interprets the play by Foucault’s micro-power theory. In his article, he concludes that modern people face the same plight of discipline punishment as characters in *The Dumb Waiter*. Guo Tong and Xie Jinqiu contends that Harold Pinter creates a black and white environment to demystify characters’ inner feeling and their futile resistance against the power in *The Dumb Waiter*.

3. Theoretical Framework

In order to lay the theoretical foundation for the analysis of *The Dumb Waiter* according to Foucault’s disciplinary theory of power, this part gives a brief introduction to Foucault’s power theory and discuss the key terms in the theory—body, knowledge and discourse.

3.1 Foucault’s Thought on Power

Foucault’s understanding of power significantly diverges from traditional conceptions. In his view, the characters of power can be summarized as following. Firstly, power is a ubiquitous and ever-changing flow which exists in all aspects of social life and functions ceaselessly. Power is exercised pervasively

throughout social systems and operates at the most minute levels of social relations in our daily life. As eloquently stated by Foucault, “Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes everywhere” (Foucault, p. 93).

Secondly, Power is productive. It can produce reality, individual and individual’s knowledge as well as discourse. Thirdly, power is a relationship. It is produced under the interplay of various unequal and changeable relations. And as Foucault states: “I hardly ever use the word ‘power’, and if I do sometimes, it is always a short cut to the expression I always use: the relationship of power” (Foucault, p. 11).

In a word, Foucault’s power refers to “micro power”, which is regarded as a relationship, a network or a field, and it is dynamic, productive, decentralized and unstable.

3.2 *Discipline and Power*

Discipline refers to methods and tactics that “made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assure the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility” (Foucault, p. 137). In his work, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of Prison*, Foucault delves into the mechanisms of power in various institutions, including hospitals, the military, schools, and prisons. Through the lens of power’s control and manipulation over the human body, he uncovers how disciplinary power shapes docile individuals and useful objects. This is achieved through techniques such as hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination. Knowledge is another crucial concept within Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power. As the fundamental tool for power to intervene and control society, knowledge fulfills the function of normalizing the system under the guise of “truth.” “It is a double process, then; an epistemological ‘thaw’ through a refinement of power relations; a multiplication of the effects of power through the formation and accumulation of new forms of knowledge” (Foucault, p. 224). Power can manipulate knowledge to be involved into the game of truth. Furthermore, the truth is produced by power, and it naturally consolidates the power statement.

Discourse is also an important means to generate and strengthen power. Where there are humans, there are discourses; where there are discourses, there are powers. According to Foucault, discourse is “a group of statements that belong to a single statement of formation” (Foucault, p. 107). Power is closely associated with the discourse, and only through discourse, an important medium, can power truly achieve its effects. In this way, institutions utilize discourse to ensure the effectiveness of their power.

3.3 *Resistance of Disciplinary Power*

The existence of resistance is a constant companion of power relationships, as resistance forms wherever power operates. Power’s omnipresence and multiplicity inevitably limit resistance’s scope. Furthermore, due to power’s interconnected nature as a network, a singular struggle can trigger ripples throughout the entire system. Foucault’s theory emphasizes resistance over mere passive submission, suggesting that when two forces collide within an individual, they enhance its potency. In this regard, individuals are not mere recipients of power; they are active agents exercising and resisting power within themselves.

In *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of Prison*, Foucault interprets penal affairs as a clash inherent to civilization, where major crimes are the fatal repercussions and rebellions against repressed elements,

rather than mere monsters. Similarly, minor infractions are not perceived as the inevitable fringes of society; they are vibrations emanating from the heart of the battlefield. Foucault views power as a dynamic entity, rather than static, and individuals are not mere passive recipients of power; they play a pivotal role in this power play. They have the capacity to revolt, resist, and thus participate in this dynamic system.

4. An Interpretation of *The Dumb Waiter* from Foucault's Disciplinary Power

4.1 Disciplinary Power in The Dumb Waiter

The one-act play tells the story of two killers, Ben and Gus waiting the instruction from their organization in a basement. The plot is quite simple while the invisible discipline power acts in the play all the time. The two characters have always been under the gaze and control of power. The following parts will show the discipline power on Ben and Gus in detail.

4.1.1 Imprisonment of Bodies Under the Disciplinary Power

The “jail cell-like” basement indicates the bodies of two characters in this play are imprisoned by the seemingly invisible power. In the opening scene of the play, Pinter introduces a windowless room furnished with nothing but two beds, an almost exact replica of a prison. Inside this bed-setting room enclosed by the dark and mysterious world outside, Ben and Gus, two hired assassins, are waiting in dreadful suspense for the door on the right to open and their victim to enter. Isolated in a closed environment, they are excluded from the outside world, as Gus summarizes it, “you come into a place when it’s 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.” (Pinter, p. 4) Their bodies are imprisoned by the mysterious organization. However, Ben and Gus are unaware of the dumb waiter’s presence, or of the possibility of being surveilled.

Once the two have been isolated and sentenced to imprisonment, the process of their reformation and normalization begins in the hands of the unseen authority. During Ben and Gus’ endlessly waiting for the order, strange events happened in the play, such as an envelope sliding under the door, the toilet flushing when neither Ben nor Gus is in the lavatory, and the sudden clattering of the dumb waiter with orders for food, the two are unable or too dumb to explain these or react appropriately. At first, they desperately try to fill the orders coming down the dumb waiter, but as these become more and more vague, the two try to convince the unfathomable power that they have nothing to send. Foucault claims that disciplinary power consists of three elements: “hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and examination” (Foucault, p. 170). In fact, these strange events all suggested that Ben and Gus are under the surveillance of the hierarchical surveillance from the organization of Wilson. At the same time, the two characters receive continuous examination from the organization to reform them and render them docile and useful by depriving of their freedom.

4.1.2 Manipulation of Knowledge

In the play *The Dumb Waiter*, newspaper actually is the symbol of Knowledge which cannot be questioned. In this play, the scene of reading newspapers appeared three times and it is always Ben who holds the power. “Newspaper implies the hierarchy of power, and those who own it have the advantage and are the one who issue orders” (Huang, p. 2018). From the stage directions at the start, it becomes evident to the audience that Ben’s attention is drawn towards Gus rather than the paper. Ben always reads newspapers and observes Gus now and again. This already demonstrates Ben’s superior status and his dominance over Gus. On the first occasion, Ben reports that an eighty-seven-year-old man wanted to cross a crowded road but found the traffic too heavy to squeeze through, and so he crawled under a lorry, which then started up and ran over him. These are the dialogues of the two men:

Ben (slamming his paper down): Kaw!

Gus: What’s that?

Ben: He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.

....

GUS: Go on!

BEN: That’s what it says here.

GUS: Get away,

BEN: It’s enough to make you want to puke, isn’t it?

GUS: Who advised him to do a thing like that?

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. (Pinter, p. 1)

Newspaper is the only medium they get information from the outside world in a relatively closed basement. Ben tries to tell Gus the content of the newspaper and Gus is also thirsted to gain information. Ben’s extreme reactions to the content of paper, such as slamming and seizing, are not merely signs of disgust at the content, but indicate an inner struggle for greater comprehension of what is happening in the world. Ben’s thirst for information or knowledge is buried deeper than Gus’s. The conversation also highlights the important distinction between the characters. Gus’s innate response to the new information is to question it directly. As the information from a credible and authoritative source, Ben says “It’s down here in black and white” which means he conforms to the authority although he may dissatisfy with the event given by the paper.

Moments later comes the second occasion:

BEN: A child of eight killed a cat!

GUS: Get away.

BEN: It’s a fact. What about that, eh? A child of eight killing a cat!

GUS: How did he do it?

BEN: It was a girl.

GUS: How did she do it?

BEN: She—

He picks up the paper and studies it.

It doesn't say.

GUS: Why not?

BEN: Wait a minute. It just says—Her brother, aged eleven, viewed the incident from the toolshed.

GUS: Go on!

BEN: That's bloody ridiculous.

Pause.

GUS: I bet he did it.

BEN: Who?

GUS: The brother.

BEN: I think you're right.

Pause. (Pinter, p. 3)

On this occasion, Ben also don't agree with the news item, dissatisfied with the event given by the paper, which evidently doesn't conform to their notions about eight-year-old girls. Even people like Ben who blindly obeys the authority recognize that it is a false built-in fact given by the authority, which means the hierarchical power tries to manipulate the knowledge of the public by defining norms of conduct.

4.1.3 Suppression of Gus's Voice in *The Dumb Waiter*

In *The Dumb Waiter*'s menacing world, the oppositional voice is forcefully silenced, and conformity is a desired human trait. In the play, Gus attempts to communicate with Ben, repeating the similar phrase "I want to ask you some questions" seven times, but Ben always keeps silence because he is the one who holds the decisive power in his dialogues with Gus. Being inferior position, Gus cannot speak out. For example:

BEN: You never ask me so many damn questions. What came over you?

GUS: No, I was just wondering.

BEN: Stop wondering. You've got a job to do. Why don't you just do it and shut up? (Pinter, p. 12)

According to Foucault, discipline is achieved through imposing precise norms. The goal here, is to reform or "to correct deviant behavior" (Gutting, 2011, p. 9). Therefore, when Gus starts questioning, as he becomes fed up, he immediately becomes abnormal in the eyes of the criminal organization. His questions are noisily interrupted by the dumb waiter which is about to test whether Gus can go back to being just a machine. However, Gus is failing his exam so he must be silenced once and for all.

4.2 Gus's Resistance against Disciplinary Power

In the play only Gus tries to speak, challenging the system for which he works. Gus repeatedly questions what is going on outside of the basement room they are in. He keeps expressing doubt about the nature of their work, rather than, like Ben, continuing blindly to obey orders of their employer. Gus is living

like a real man. He pursues a room with a window because he desires for the outside world. Gus's anxiety over not having the matches or any money for the gas meter to boil a cup of tea shows his chaste for living a normal life.

Gus is a rebel of authority in this play. Gus always asks seemingly meaningless questions all the time to find the answer in the absurd world. He tries to resist against the disciplinary power by asking questions. In the play, Gus repeatedly asks several questions. The first is "what time is he getting in touch?", which implies who they are being controlled by. The pronoun 'he' here refers to the superior Wilson who holds Ben and Gus in his grasp, issuing instructions by telephone and randomly arranging their lives. He can get in tough at any time, while Ben and Gus are left waiting anxiously. This suggests that Wilson embodies the mysterious, invisible, yet omnipresent power that common people know little about but are still at its mercy. The second one is "who is going to be tonight?" conveys the identity of the intended victim in the world of ambiguity and anonymous menace. The last question "what's he playing all the game for?" is a sardonic commentary on the inevitable fate of those caught in the web of mysterious power. Even if we follow instructions, we cannot escape its games, and even our loyalty to fate is not enough to earn its trust. Ultimately, those who harm others will meet their own demise, as no one can escape the arrangement of the world.

At first glance, Gus's questions appear to center on the task, yet his underlying intention is to deeply reevaluate the absurdities of the world and to seek rebellion against the oppressive disciplinary power.

5. Conclusion

This thesis analyzes *The Dumb Waiter* from the perspective of Foucault's disciplinary power theory. It gives a view of how Ben and Gus, the play's two characters, are normed by the power and Gus's resistance against the power. From this perspective, the plight of human existence is revealed. The idea of individual liberty is actually the liberty within the prison; one is free only in a conformist way, only as long as one remains a dumb waiter. Modern society creates dumb waiters, subjects who are too busy spending and thus incapable of questioning their morals and norms. We are being skillfully kept in line with the help of new surveillance technology that is impossible to detect at all times, and is thus internalized. Even more alarming is the new fashion for exposure of privacy among modern dumb waiters, who willingly share their personal information in exchange for becoming a part of the global internet network. Privacy is no longer a taboo; instead we all live in one big public room, or rather a cell, with our back strongly to the wall. This is a situation that certainly cannot be laughed off.

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