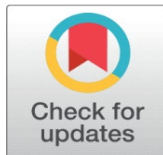
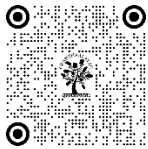


# A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF OBEDIENCE IN HAROLD PINTER'S THE DUMB WAITER

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## ABSTRACT

British playwright Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* was first performed in 1960. The play revolved around the two hitmen, Ben and Gus, who were waiting for the entirety of the play in a windowless, dreary basement room to receive an order from the higher authority for their next target. Both the hitmen had been receiving coded incomprehensible messages and complex food orders through a dumb waiter which might be from their higher-ups. The coded messages never revealed the exact nature of the requirement from the assassins as well as the identity of that night's target. Ben was experienced, sedate, and professional, while Gus was inquisitive about their tasks. Gus complained about the little space he got from his superiors. He hinted at the disrespect he felt due to the callous dealings of his higher-ups. In fact, he was not ready to accept the class hierarchy. He was also dissatisfied with how their employers considered them meaningless. On the other hand, Ben, the senior hitman, was compliant with his employers and maintained silence regarding the unpleasant nature of his work. His views contradicted Gus, and he advised his junior to accept the class hierarchy. Gus showed his resistance against the authority while Ben remained obedient to his superior authority. The binary of obedience and resistance, as depicted through the characters of Ben and Gus, is a central theme of *The Dumb Waiter*. This study attempts to examine the theme of obedience in *The Dumb Waiter*.

**Keywords:** Obedience, Resistance, Power Dynamics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter, who began his career as an actor and also directed for stage, radio, and television, was one of the most famous modern playwrights. His dramatic style often involves stilted dialogues in which characters use language in a repetitive, illogical, and displaced way. In his play *The Dumb Waiter*, the influence of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco can be seen, yet it also presages certain themes as well as stylistic features that characterize much of Pinter's subsequent works. The play was first produced in Frankfurt and made its London debut in 1960 at the Hampstead Theatre Club in England.

Though *The Dumb Waiter* is associated with the absurd drama genre, contemporary reviewers concurred that the play offered delightful laughter. The dialogue was described as chillingly lucid and terrifyingly illogical, and the characters were seen both as real and symbolic in the purest form. The entire dramatic scenario was acknowledged for generating constant suspense. As with Pinter's subsequent works, communication takes center stage in *The Dumb Waiter*. It serves not as a pathway to comprehension, but as a means of asserting and safeguarding power and identity through resistance. The relevance and accuracy of what the characters express is called into question, while the

significance of those who remain silent is equally profound. Their silence carries weighty implications, and what remains unsaid resonates louder, penetrates deeper, and captivates more than spoken words. This is why Pinter even employs meaningful pauses in his stage directions. Adhering to the principles of the systemic approach, Pinter's work is viewed as a demonstration of the potency of language and an implicit commentary on the social structure inferred by language. The primary focus is not on the helplessness and degradation of the individual, but on the inhumane imposition epitomized by insecurity, chaos, and despair of authorities preoccupied solely with material achievement. It is in the realm of social conventions, as in charades, the fortified bastions of the superstructure, that Pinter's language appears absurd. His propensity for self-deception is less apparent among individuals and more pronounced between social classes, nations, and races, with the manipulative system displaying the highest degree of organization and cunning in upholding it.

The narrative of *The Dumb Waiter*, much like many of Pinter's later works, serves as a representation of the perspective of the expansion of a straightforward factual circumstance into a parable of the human predicament. The connections between Gus and Ben, as well as the connections between the individual and society, are presented with detachment. Ben commences with a foot-in-the-door approach, as evidenced by his perusal of various newspapers, sports affiliations, surveillance, comebacks, and gradually delves into the precise intricacies of the personal dilemma.

In literature, the concept of obedience encompasses compliance with authority or rules, encompassing moral and ethical obligations, regard to higher powers, and inner compulsion, whether in relation to others, oneself, or life's circumstances. The theme of obedience signifies internal turmoil within the human mind when faced with dilemmas or outside pressures. It is considered as a force which can affect a character's growth or change the direction of a story. Obedience holds connotations for the understanding of human nature and for the delineation of social hierarchy and the power dynamics. The concept of obedience has been used in various ways in different dramas; some of them dig into the elements of sympathy, compromise, and compulsion innate in obedience, while some others explore its outcomes and implications. Besides, there are dramatists who considered obedience as a matter relevant to modern social living, referring to the social responsibilities of an individual. However, in some works, the issue of obedience becomes a feature of social compliance, resulting in the surfacing of sympathy where obedience is viewed as a matter of important individual concern. The ethical elements surrounding obedience are of great importance, because different characters exhibit varying approaches to obedience, the results of which are dependent upon individual strength of character.

## **2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF OBEDIENCE IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

The 20th century observed two world wars and many social upheavals which etched a deep-seated mark on the outlooks toward obedience. Political obedience grew into complete adherence to oppressive authorities, where power became synonymous with domination. Rebellion occurred in the form of dissent and protest, which became the mainstay of the democratic society against the oppressive authority. Oppressive regimes that emerged across Europe in this period relied on the ever ready obedience of the masses, which utilized persistent indoctrination through different ways such as media, propaganda, education, art, enforced rituals, and also by displaying the strength over the weak. The philosophers and psychologists of the 20th century grappled with the concept of obedience, delving into the subconscious conformist behavior that shapes our attitudes towards authority. While philosophers sought to understand authority and obedience as rational categories, psychologists analyzed family structure, psycho-sexual development, child-rearing techniques, and the moral fabric of society to explain submissive attitudes towards authority. These theoretical constructs, complemented by the work of social and political scientists, were thought to cover the relevant empirical ground.

## **3. THEATRICAL TECHNIQUES AND OBEDIENCE IN THE DUMB WAITER**

In *The Dumb Waiter*, the frequent repetition of commands by the characters leads to a peculiar blend of silence and suffocation. The play is characterized by pauses rather than dialogues. These pauses create an unusual silence and physical resistance, subverting mere repetition. Throughout the work, the use of pauses and silences convey resistance and lack of obedience. *The Dumb Waiter* seems to explore ideas about obedience and resistance through distinctive stage directions and frequent use of setting. The minimal stage directions describe a stark setting that does little to establish atmosphere or mood, confining the characters to a psychological space that dictates their interactions. In *The Dumb Waiter*, it is the setting that isolates and entraps the characters. The text and stage performance work hand in hand to

offer Ben an illusion of authority, but at the same time also hints at its unreliable nature. The drama highlights the dynamics of two figures, one is authoritative and the other is subordinate. It is clear that there is much to the situation than to the eyes, showing Ben's true objectives. He manipulates Gus, and as the play progresses it divulges the undercurrent of power struggle and the deeper motivations of the characters.

#### 4. CHARACTER ANALYSIS: BEN AND GUS

In *The Dumb Waiter*, the two major characters are Ben and Gus. Gus, being newer, he is compliant and curious. Ben's manner is commanding and callous, and as he is the person in charge, he constantly ridicules and diminishes Gus. Ben states that Gus's complaints are unreasonable. Being working class people, they must respect the social class and hierarchies they belong. Ben believes that to make their lives worthy of living they should modify their attitudes.

Ben : You know what your trouble is ?

Gus : What ?

Ben : You haven't got any interests. (Pinter, 90)

On the other hand, Gus is compliant and inquisitive. He is like the traditional servant who receives orders and quickly acts upon them. Ben and Gus are engaged in conversations which express that they are obedient to their duties. At the same time, their interactions also express a larger reality beyond their personality. It expresses how they are marginalized and in what way they attempt to respond to the unfolding of the events. Ben, who enjoys greater knowledge about his position, informs Gus that it is not wise to go against social convention. Ben also informs Gus that it is his own interest to show obedience to authority. However, at the same time, Ben also indirectly warns Gus to be careful regarding his words because they may be considered as challenge to the authority. Therefore, Ben says:

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

Gus: You.

Ben: I'm only looking after your interests, you've got to learn, mate. (Pinter, 98)

Ben and Gus communicate with each other which express the complex reality of their existence. Their expressions reveal the psychological turmoil within them. Ben seeks his identity from the acceptance he receives from a higher authority unknown to him. This higher commanding authority governs him. Ben is a link to a greater commanding structure. His conversation with Gus throws light on his apprehensions of losing his command. Gus shows sudden acts of defiance that brings cruel responses from the higher authority. In sheer frustration, Gus refers to their boss, Wilson, who according to him is not concerned about their well-being and so provides them a windowless room that lacks basic necessities like clothes and foods - "Gus: He doesn't seem to bother much about our comfort these days." (Pinter, 91) Though they are low ranked, it is not the justification for the neglect they face. In the interactions between Ben and Gus which are evident throughout the drama, there are subtle examples of obedience and defiance. Fighting with their own inner turmoil, both the characters reveal the different roles they play. In larger perspective, obedience is the central theme of the drama which can be examined through character analysis of Ben and Gus.

#### 5. ANALYSIS OF THE THEME OF OBEDIENCE

In *The Dumb Waiter*, there exists a power structure in which Ben enjoys authority and Gus exhibits reluctant obedience. Ben firmly applies his authority over Gus. This power structure unfurls a passage of obedience for Ben and on the other hand Gus is utterly disillusioned with his insignificance. There is swing in power structure that generates stress in both the characters. Ben exhibits confidence and authority and he successfully controls the activities of Gus. It is because of this that Gus wants to go deep into the instructions they receive but Ben does not support him. In fact, Ben is indifferent to the queries of Gus and cleverly manipulates him without resorting direct assertion. It is this absence of direct control that makes his authority more formidable. He establishes a setting where a trivial action demonstrates his authority. However, there are irregular acts of disobedience from Gus which shows that the commanding power of Ben over Gus is sometimes dependent on performance. This shows that both the characters take definite roles, and obedience is only a basic feature of this make-believe.

### 5.1. OBEDIENCE AS EXISTENTIAL THEME IN THE DUMB WAITER

The Dumb Waiter is laden with existential thoughts. The characters Ben and Gus fight with meaningless dilemmas. Their condition raises inquiries into the spirit of humanity, themes of being, attachment, and intention. Pinter's works generally portray the clash between allegiance and free will. They also express a struggle between compliance and conviction. Here, obedience sometimes transforms into a search for individual freedom which knock at the raw emotional chords that undermines the void. The sufferers in Pinter's plays receive a tangible display of acknowledgment from the hands of those in power. It can be considered a bestowal of purpose, a rationale for existence or at best a fleeting taste of liberation. The theme of identity is embedded in The Dumb Waiter. The effort of Ben and Gus to recall their objective is an important feature that focuses light on their baffled state. The complex relationship between labour and mission is explored in the play. Both the characters attempt to decode the meaning of their duty i.e., whether it is simply their profession or an emotional catharsis. Such a dilemma often pervades the realm of Pinter's dramatic sphere. The tendency towards expressive conversation and skepticism towards external appearances and rhetoric induce an in-depth investigation of identity.

### 5.2. GENDER AND OBEDIENCE IN THE PLAY

The relationship between femininity and obedience is distinctive. Women are anticipated to surrender and yield to the authority of men. Obedience is often perceived as a show of weakness, and so ascribed exclusively to the inferior gender. Same kind of power structure is marked in The Dumb Waiter, where the characters attempt to fortify their authority through their compliance. In this context, Ben and Gus lack conventional masculine traits, thereby divulging their subordinate positions of authority. As a result, the early obedience of Gus towards Ben augments the perception of Ben's power. The conventional subsidiary role of Gus is confirmed, as he is required to obey Ben's commands. Therefore, obedience and hierarchy explain gender roles, limiting and containing the behavior and conducts of individuals.

The notion of obedience is often allied to femininity. It is interesting that subordination and obedience both are prevalent in The Dumb Waiter. The reproaches of Ben serve to subjugate Gus and affirm his own authority and position. The obedient reiteration of the same identity accentuates the continuing nature of their dilemmas and their lack of independence. It is observed that defiance can only serve to confine the individuals. It is apparent that if Ben does not retrieve the control he exerts at the early phase of the play The Dumb Waiter, he will be in immediate danger of losing his authority. Thus, the interplay of power structure and gender roles demonstrates the restraining nature of the dramatic world of The Dumb Waiter.

### 5.3. OBEDIENCE AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE

In The Dumb Waiter, Ben and Gus agree to abide by the given commands. However, their obedience is imbued with understated lapses and inner acts of defiance. As individuals in the service trade, both the characters are charged with the instinct of obeying their immediate authority and also conforming to the hierarchical configuration of their line of work. They follow the orders of their authority, but their way of doing so works as a form of resistance to their intrinsic subordinate role as receivers of these orders. This contradiction underscores the power inequity between those who provide service and those who receive it. The unfurling of how and to what level an individual can mask his defiance and the situation in which he acts explains the power struggle.

Obedience in action is an ongoing quest focused on keenly motivated for individual or collective goals. It is basically an organized process of fundamental makeover. Both Ben and Gus mask their non-conforming actions which describe them as service givers. It is a vital decision to maintain the facade of a loyal labor force. This broader understanding of flexibility goes beyond the rigid frameworks that aim to immobilize individuals in the position of either complete compliance or complete rebellion, and aids in interpreting The Dumb Waiter as a drama that challenges the conclusiveness often ascribed to it. These insights unveil a dynamic force that shapes the structures within the play, as the two engage in their enacted obedience. However, their understanding of the power they engage in is still under scrutiny. They perceive it through their own individual perceptions of those to whom it is directed and therefore, recognize that the authority compels them which they are unable to resist.

The vast array of literary pieces delving into the themes of compliance, supremacy, and acquiescence provides a simple basis for comparison with *The Dumb Waiter*. Characters exhibit compliance towards higher authority without evident justification. The latent power wielded by a figure of authority reflects the potential for cruelty, which could result in Gus's downfall. In the domain of English literature, the portrayal of the human mind entails the representation of different aspects of the self within an individual - including a childlike self and a parental self. This duality is apparent in the personas of Ben and Gus. The primary focus is not to provide a logical or tangible justification for the characters' behaviors, but rather to depict the gradual descent into absurd and dramatic circumstances. Consequently, the text's organization and dramatic components coalesce to form a surreal and absurdist atmosphere, underscoring the triviality of the rationale for obedience in the unfolding plot. The distinctiveness of *The Dumb Waiter* rests in its capacity to encapsulate these varied thoughts and discussions, serving as a product of an era where scientific and deterministic perspectives were gaining ascendancy over processes of mediation and understanding.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* has garnered significant attention from scholars since its debut in 1960. The play is considered a crucial piece in Pinter's early collection of works, representing his initial venture into the examination of obedience as a central motif. However, in public and journalistic conversations about Harold Pinter, discussions regarding the play's subject matter and thematic importance are frequently marginalized. The notion of obedience is often briefly mentioned, serving as a convenient answer to the audience's inquiries, and is often eclipsed by prevailing interpretations of *The Dumb Waiter*.

In scholarly discussions, a wide range of critical viewpoints exist regarding the portrayal of obedience in the play. The prevailing consensus is that *The Dumb Waiter* delves into the theme of obedience in a meaningful manner, prompting both audience and readers to contemplate their respective societies and the authorities to whom they yield differing levels of obedience. The foundation of these viewpoints predominantly hinges on an analysis of either the play's structure resembling that of a gunman, or the implications of Gus's character on the theme of obedience within the narrative. Various scholars argue for a multitude of interpretations: resistance to authority, subjugation of individuals, indoctrination into obedience, ambivalence towards authority, passive response to violence, bureaucratic systems, apprehension, despotism, harsh reality, a society devoid of social and moral values in a violent urban world, and the portrayal of an absurd reality. Indeed, the diverse array of responses to the theme of obedience in *The Dumb Waiter* highlights the value of thoroughly exploring this particular aspect within the academic realm.

In conclusion it can be said that the model of obedience portrayed in *The Dumb Waiter* is a convoluted interplay of opposing emotions. It steers through the cruelty and compliance displayed by Ben and Gus, the deep craving for conformity and solidity, the dislodgment of identity, and the existing cultural relation with the theme. The unreadable character of the dumb waiter suitably represents the complex aspects and forms of authority, total compliance, and authoritative system surveyed in literature. Obedience in *The Dumb Waiter* is a subtle phenomenon due to the entwining of the gestures of Ben and Gus with themes of job relations, shared memories, and also the probing of one's position in the professional milieu and society as a whole. In the end, it can be said that theme of obedience and compliance in drama will charm audience and critics universally due to the thematic variety and subtlety as well as for their dramatic resourcefulness and novelty, as demonstrated in *The Dumb Waiter*.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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