

Verbal Strategies, Bodily Violence and Power: An Interpretation of *The Dumb Waiter* from the Perspective of Macro Power

Tianyi Yang

Department of Foreign Language, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, Hubei, China

Abstract: Winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005, Harold Pinter's unique Pinteresque style and unparalleled contribution to contemporary drama writing have always caught literal critics' attention. One of his early dramas, *The Dumb Waiter* tells the story of two killers in one basement room waiting for the final order to come, ending in a quite unexpected way because it turns out that one killer is exactly the target. As one of his earlier works which seems to be distant from grand narrative, *The Dumb Waiter* is more known as the typical "comedy of menace" in the field of literature criticism. Recently, however, those early works' potential value in the view of macro power is more recognized. This article, in this light, will attempt to shed light on the drama's macro power by analyzing the complex relationship among the verbal strategies, bodily violence and power embodied in the work.

Keywords: Harold Pinter; Power; Grand Narrative; Bodily Violence

1. Introduction

In 2005, Harold Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, which marked the climax of his writing career. In all those years, critics have tried using schools such as existentialism, post-modernism and the Absurd Drama to tag Pinter's works, however, the efforts are all in vain. It is the judges of the Nobel Prize, the writer of this article believes, who best summarize Pinter's literature style, "(Pinter) uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms." [1] *The Dumb Waiter*, in this sense, is a typical play which embodies Pinter's writing features. Published in 1960, it tells the story of two killers in one basement room waiting for the final order to come, ending in a quite unexpected way because it turns out that one

killer is exactly the target. Before the 1990s, it was generally believed that his works with obvious political tendencies only began to appear after the publication of *One for the Road* in 1984. His earlier works, including *The Dumb Waiter*, are more known as the "comedy of menace" instead of a political play. However, as a matter of fact, the theme of politics and power is touched upon all through his works^[2], just like what he said in an interview, "I think in the early days, which was 30 years ago in fact, I was a political playwright of a kind."^[3] Thus, it can be said that *The Dumb Waiter* can also be interpreted as a political play, "*The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*, in my understanding then, were to do with states of affairs which could certainly be termed political."^[3]

Nevertheless, up to now, the political aspect of *The Dumb Waiter* has been relatively less studied by scholars at home and abroad. While Chinese scholars focus more on the theme of spiritual isolation in modern society, foreign scholars are keen on utilizing Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts to explore the poetics of the drama, in other words, how the drama is written. The article, in this sense, will try to fill in the gap. By a close reading of the play, an insight into the relationship among verbal strategies, bodily violence and power will be offered. In this way, the political metaphor of the abuse of state power in this drama will be revealed.

2. The Verbal Strategies: Language as A Way to Construct Power

Noting the importance of language for the construction of power, Pinter has argued that all his dramas have to do with "terrorizing through words of power – verbal power, verbal facility".^[4] In this light, *The Dumb Waiter* may be the most pertinent one, in which Ben is clearly in a dominant position whereas Gus is the subordinate. This power relationship can be inferred from the repetitive use of imperative

sentences carrying a strong sense of order by Ben to Gus such as “Open it!” “Go on!” and “Pick it up!”^[5] As far as the writer of the article is concerned, there are three verbal strategies used by Ben to construct his power over Gus: acknowledgment seeking, evasion of key issues, and verbal abuse.

The acknowledgement-seeking strategy is manifested in the action of Ben’s telling selected news to Gus, as noted by Coppa, “The fact that Ben is taking on the work of reading aloud indicates that he is desiring a particular kind of reaction from Gus, and selecting articles that will produce such a reaction.”^[6] To paraphrase it, Ben expects Gus to side with him, laughing at “the stupidity or cruelty of his fellow human beings.” Through this, Ben as the symbol of power ensures that Gus has the same world view as his own. Indeed, if a look is taken at the news Ben chooses, they both expose the bad nature of human beings: An old man of 87 does not know how to manage through the heavy traffic on the road, so he “crawled under a lorry”^[5], which shows human’s ignorance. By contrast, a child of only 8 killing a cat indicates human’s inborn cruel nature, since such a young girl can do an inhumane thing like that. In one word, through these two stories, Gus’s subtext is clear: Any man deserves to be killed because he is innately bad. This mode of thinking is necessary for hitmen like them to hold to ease their potential fear and guilt. This identification-seeking strategy used by Ben, in this sense, is to force the hitman ideology into Gus.^[6]

However, Gus, as defined by Chen Hongwei as a non-conformist^[2], fails to give Ben the supposed reaction of identifying with the latter. Although Huo Hongyu argues that Gus only responds to the news in an indifferent way and believes that the death is controlled by someone powerful^[1], the writer of this article believes that the response indicates that he identifies with the victimized side. For instance, by saying “Who advised him to do a thing like that?” (Pinter 54), Gus successfully shifts the responsibility to a hypothetical adviser who lurks menacingly. In this sense, the old man is worth pitying, which directly challenges and undermines the hitman ideology mentioned before^[6]. Gus’s rebellious tendency is revealed at the beginning of the play, where he asks Ben, “Don’t you ever get a bit fed up?”^[5],

suggesting his tiredness from his boring and cruel work. This tiredness is more crystallized by Gus’s words as follows:

“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, Ben. It whiles away the time. I mean, 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. I like to get a look at the scenery. You never get the chance in this job.”^[5]

It is conveyed that the organization he works for is like the basement room without a window he lives in, making him feel rather suppressed. As a result, he longs for the fresh air outside. It is this tiredness that makes him begin to rethink the current situation. Thus, many issues are raised, implying Gus’s efforts to try to find meaning in his dull job^[2]. To hold his discourse power, Ben, in the face of these questions, chooses to evade them and instead changes the subject to the tea making. Therefore, the dialogue pattern in which Gus asks questions whereas Ben does not answer the question directly and asks the former to make tea happens all through the drama. An example can be taken from the play:

GUS I want to ask you something.

BEN What are you doing out there?

GUS Well, I was just—

BEN What about the tea?

GUS I’m just going to make it.

BEN. Well, go on, make it.

GUS. Yes, I will. (He sits in a chair. Ruminatively.) He’s laid on some very nice crockery this time, I’ll say that. It’s sort of striped. There’s a white stripe.

(BEN reads)

It’s very nice. I’ll say that.

(BEN turns the page)

You know, sort of round the cup. Round the rim. All the rest of it’s black, you see. Then the saucer’s black, except for right in the middle, where the cup goes, where it’s white.

(BEN reads)

Then the plates are the same, you see. Only they’ve got a black stripe – the plates – right across the middle. Yes, I’m quite taken with the crockery.

BEN (still reading) What do you want plates for? You’re not going to eat.^[5]

In this dialogue, in response to Gus’s request

to ask a question, Ben immediately changes the topic two times, respectively into the thing Gus is doing and tea-making. Gus agrees to make the tea orally, however, he is still immersed in his inner world, judging from all his words about the cup and the plate. To deal with this situation, Ben does not give any comment at first for if he does so, Gus will be in the dominant position in this conversation. At last, Ben points out the uselessness of the topic Gus raises: since there is no intention to eat, the plates are needless. This move clearly negates any practical meaning of Gus's topic, and by virtue of this, Ben's dominant position in the conversation is upheld.^[7]

With time going by, nevertheless, Ben's dominant position is constantly challenged by Gus. It seems that Gus gradually becomes more aware of their situation of being "imprisoned" in a closed room and wants to be free. Noticeably, Gus even begins to question the power that controls them, namely Wilson, who is their leader, for "half the time he doesn't even bother to put in an appearance."^[5] Thus, a more aggressive verbal strategy is taken advantage of, that is, verbal abuse. The chosen dialogue here pertinently exemplifies the use of verbal abuse, before which Gus complains about being totally controlled by the dumb waiter:

BEN seizes the tube and flings GUS away. He follows GUS and slaps him hard, back-handed, across the chest.

BEN Stop it! **You maniac!**

GUS But you heard!

BEN (*savagely*) That's enough! **I'm warning you!**^[5]

As a reaction to Gus's discontent and anger towards the Dumb Waiter, which is clearly the symbol of the ultimate power in this play, Ben calls Gus a "maniac" in discourse, aiming at degrading Gus's self-esteem. The implicit message is easy to guess: Be reasonable and don't rebel against the power anymore, and this message is strengthened by the threat "I'm warning you." Therefore, by virtue of the verbal abuse, Ben assumes his authority, that is, to maintain his power over Gus.

3. The Bodily Violence: Body as the Location for Power Manipulation

Apart from the verbal strategies discussed above, bodily violence also takes a prominent

position in *The Dumb Waiter*. Just like language, bodily violence also has a close relationship with power, in that power always takes the form of bodily violence, and this relationship was clearly expressed in one of Harold Pinter's interviews, "But I feel the question of how power is used and how violence is used, how you terrorize somebody, how you subjugate somebody, has always been alive in my work."^[3] In a similar vein, Foucault also notices the relationship between power and body in his famous work *Discipline and Punish*, "But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."^[8] To say it in another way, the body is exactly the place where the manipulation of power takes place. To contextualize that in the play, Ben carries out bodily violence towards Gus several times to gain control over the latter or to correct his "misbehavior". An example can be quoted in this drama to prove that point:

BEN It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech!

GUS I've never heard it.

BEN Light the kettle! It's common usage!

GUS I think you've got it wrong.

BEN (*menacing*) What do you mean?

GUS They say put on the kettle.

BEN (*taut*) Who says?

They stare at each other, breathing hard.

(*Deliberately*) I have never in all my life heard anyone say put on the kettle.

GUS I bet my mother used to say it.

BEN Your mother? When did you last see your mother?

GUS I don't know, about-

BEN Well, what are you talking about your mother for?

They stare.

Gus, I'm not trying to be unreasonable. I'm just trying to point out something to you.

GUS Yes, but-

BEN. Who's **the senior partner** here, me or you?

GUS You.

BEN. I'm only looking after your interests, Gus. You've got to learn, mate.

GUS Yes, but I've never heard.

BEN (*vehemently*) Nobody says light the gas! What does the gas light?

GUS What does the gas -?

BEN (*grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm's length*) THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL! (Pinter 59)

The strategy of Ben to control Gus has clearly been changed throughout the conversation. At first, Ben strives to achieve that purpose in a more moderate way, "I'm not trying to be unreasonable. I'm just trying to point out something to you", which implies that he does not have any intention for menace and what he wants to do is to point out the truth. When he sees Gus still wants to argue with him on that issue, nevertheless, Ben immediately reminds Gus of their power relation. By asking who is the senior partner, the subtext is foregrounded: I'm the leader so you should not argue with me. All you should do is follow me. When that fails again, finally, Ben resorts to the most extreme way of manifesting his power: bodily violence. He grabs Gus by the throat, which is a sign of threatening to kill the latter. Through the manipulation of Gus's body, Ben uses his power to curtail Gus's deviant thoughts and feelings. The scene above seems to be absurd at first sight, for they argue and even fight over such trivial issues as word usage. But there is reason under the seemingly absurd fight, that is, the struggle to hold the power and to manifest it.

The bodily violence grows more vehement at the end of the play for Gus's tendency to rebel from the power becomes stronger. In this sense, bodily violence both serves as a tool to discipline and to warn:

GUS I asked you a question.

BEN Enough!

GUS (*with growing agitation*) I asked you before. **Who moved in?** I asked you. You said the people who had it before moved out. Well, who moved in?

BEN (*hunched*) **Shut up.**

GUS. I told you, didn't I?

BEN (*standing*) **Shut up!**

GUS (feverishly) I told you before who owned this place, didn't I? I told you.

BEN hits him viciously on the shoulder.

I told you who ran this place, didn't I?

BEN hits him viciously on the shoulder. ^[5]

If a comparison is made between these two examples, a pattern can be inferred that

Ben's bodily violence towards Gus is always followed by an oral order failure. In this case, Ben orders Gus to not ask questions about the mystical power which controls them anymore

by saying "shut up" two times. Gus's disobedience to this order makes Ben hit the former hard on the shoulder, indicating his attempt to assume authority. Compared with the bodily violence in the previous example which is more of a threat, however, the violence in this scene is more intended to harm the body, which is of a discipline to correct Gus's "misbehavior" of refusing to follow the order. Thus, in this light, it can be speculated that the power prohibits any deviant thought, all it wants is obedience.

How the writer depicts Gus in the last scene, furthermore, is also worth noticing, "GUS stumbles in. He is stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and revolver. He stops, body stooping, his arms at his sides." ^[5] From his rebellious behavior before, it can be well inferred that it is the power that strips him of his clothes, which degrades his dignity as a human being. This is strengthened by his body posture that follows. One possible reason why he stumbles is that he may be beaten outside. So, bodily violence here functions as punishment for his "traitor" behavior.

4. The Political Metaphor: The Abuse of State Power

The hint of why Harold Pinter is obsessed with portraying power, violence, and verbal facility, which is embodied in the play *The Dumb Waiter*, may lie in the outside world. When it comes to the relationship between the drama and reality, Chinese scholars tend to think that it is an irony of decadent British capitalism after the Second World War whose unemployment rate was high and economy was stagnant. As a result, the whole society was filled with mistrust, uneasiness and insecurity ^[9]. Li Hua's statement in his article best summarizes this view, "It is through the portrayal of the inner fears and aspirations of these underclass and the conflicts in their daily lives that Pinter reveals the suppression of social power on them, and through the absurd experience of those people, he expresses the decadence of the British and even all capitalist societies at that time."^[10] This kind of understanding does make sense to some extent, nevertheless, the interpretation at this level is not enough when Harold Pinter's personal experience and his tendency to dramatize that the political is the personal ^[11] is taken into consideration. In this light, the writer of this

article believes that the drama is more of a political metaphor for the abuse of state power. It is argued that subconsciousness has a huge influence on writing, which is exactly Pinter's case ^[2]. As a British Jew, he grows up in the 1940s under the ghost of Fascism and Nazism ^[6], and the aftermath of the second war and holocaust has haunted him all his lifetime ^[2]. This pushes him to reflect on the root cause for why the massacre has taken place, and the reflection, furthermore, is embodied in his theatrical work known as the long-lasting German Complex, which means the exploration of the guilty mental state of those Fascist killers or persecutors ^[2]. Thus, in *The Dumb Waiter*, the German Complex can also be sensed: Gus, the "traitor" of the organization, feels guilty and sympathetic towards the previous killing of a girl, "She wasn't much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn't it? What a mess. Honest, I can't remember a mess like that one. They don't seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn't she spread, eh? She didn't half spread." (Harold 61) Even Ben, portrayed as the typical Fascist killer who is cruel and indifferent, shows his sympathy and guilt by sitting up and clenching his eyes, and then comforts in a pitying way that Gus that "They got departments for everything" ^[5], which is very different from his impatient or evasive attitude towards Gus's questions. So it can be said that in Ben's inner world still exists a trace of conscience ^[2]. Moreover, it indicates that Ben, the more powerful one, may turn into Gus, the traitor since he still owns sympathy and conscience. The ending also leaves that question in full suspense: will he kill Gus? If he doesn't, he will become another Gus because he refuses to obey the order ^[2].

If the discussion of the German Complex is taken further, it is noticeable that the excessive militarizing from the adept use of guns, the inculcation of ideology ensured by violence, the massive killing of innocent people, the rigid hierarchy inside the organization itself, the harsh punishment for the "traitor", the lack of entertainment activities, even eating is considered slothful, "Eating makes you lazy, mate"^[5], and the request for absolute obedience to the supreme leader which is depicted in the drama resembles Nazi Germany to a large extent. Thus the play arguably makes a political metaphor by writing

about the killers' organization, in this sense, the absurd experience of these two characters can be interpreted as the alienation from the abuse of state power: the excessive militarization leads to the lack of mutual trust between people and when strange things come, the first reaction of both characters is to hold up the guns to protect themselves from potential dangers; the dumb waiter, the speaking-tube indicate the monitoring of state power is so pervasive that there is nowhere to escape; the verbal strategies and bodily violence used by Ben, moreover, is also the result of the alienation. Ben apparently uses those things to assume his own power, however, in essence, he just maintains the authority of the dictator, since he himself is controlled by the organization. In this aspect, just like Gus, Ben also falls victim to the power abuse, and he is just the proxy of the Hitler-like supreme leader. In other words, he is merely reduced to the tool of a national regime. Thus, it can be speculated that it is not any individual like Gus or Ben Harold Pinter wants to put blame on for the disaster of totalitarianism, but the fundamental power mechanism behind it is to blame.

However, if the metaphorical meaning of the killers' organization is limited to the Nazi Germany, the scope for understanding this drama may be narrowed. In fact, the mystical killers' organization can refer to any so-called democratic states. As observed by Juliet, Pinter's personal encounter with despotism occurred at the hands of a British military tribunal, which imprisoned him and forced him to repeatedly appear for the army medical examination, serving as a prelude to conscription. This created a "Kafkaesque cycle" of trial and jail ^[12]. Wilson, who is the leader of Gus and Ben in this play, is a parody of the American President Woodrow Wilson, who practiced the form of politics called power over sovereign decision to persuade Congress to grant him supreme authority at any time he considered necessary ^[12]. In fact, in his later years, he warned people about the danger of the return of Fascism and totalitarianism, which may explain why he wrote political dramas like *The Dumb Waiter* to remind people never to forget the lessons from history: "It is about the images of Nazi Germany; I don't think anyone can ever get that out of their mind. The Holocaust is probably the

worst thing that ever happened, because it was so calculated, deliberate and precise, and so fully documented by the people who actually did it. Their view of it is very significant. ...But it's not simply the Nazis that I'm talking about in *Ashes to Ashes*, because it would be a dereliction on my part to simply concentrate on the Nazis and leave it at that. Again, as I try to say in the article I published in the *Guardian* on Wednesday it's not simply that the United States, in my view, has created the most appalling state of affairs all over the world for many years, it's also that what we call our democracies have subscribed to these repressive, cynical and indifferent acts of murder. We sell arms to all the relevant countries, do we not? Not just the United States, but also Great Britain, France, Germany and Spain are very active in this field. And they still pat themselves on the back and call themselves a democracy. I wonder what the term 'democracy' actually means." [13]

5. Conclusion

The article analyzes the relationship between language, bodily violence and power, which serves as an entry point to the reading of *The Dumb Waiter* as a political allegory about the power abuse issue. Pinter is a humanist writer advocating for human rights, strongly opposed to any kind of imperialism and despotism. For this reason, studying Pinter's plays has huge potential values and benefits, especially in today's post-Covid world, which witnesses a rise of populism, racism, nationalism and conservatism worldwide. Just like Pinter's warning, fascism is never far away from today's world, whose shadow can be seen in the airstrike done by Israel on Gaza, in this light, Pinter's works are the best tools to warn people about the danger of state power abuse.

References

- [1] Huo Hongyu, Zhang Dingshuang. Manifestation and Metaphor - Interpreting Pinter's "The Dumb Waiter" and "The Caretaker". *English and American Literary Studies*. 1 (2007): 94-100.
- [2] Chen Hongwei. *Harold Pinter in Post-War British Theater*. University of International Trade Press, 2007.
- [3] Gussow, Mel. *Conversations with Pinter*. Proscenium Publisher, 1994.
- [4] Luckhurst, Mary. *Speaking out: Harold Pinter and freedom of expression*. The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter, Cambridge University Press, 2009: 105-120
- [5] Pinter, Harold. *Plays One*. Faber & Faber, 2013
- [6] Coppa, Francesca. *The sacred joke: comedy and politics in Pinter's early plays*. The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter, Cambridge University Press, 2009: 43-56
- [7] Wang, Jialei. *Mystery, Coercion, and the Absurdity of Survival - An Interpretation of Pinter's Play "The Dumb Waiter"*. *Journal of Yunnan Arts University*. 04 (2009): 20-25.
- [8] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Vintage Books, 1977.
- [9] Zhang, Yanxia. *Pinter's Play The Dumb Waiter in the light of New Historicism*. *Sichuan Drama*. 02 (2018): 163-165.
- [10] Li, Hua. *The Dual Discipline of Body and Discourse: The Struggle for "Micro-Power" Embodied in The Dumb Waiter*. *Journal of Yunnan Arts University*. 04 (2011): 51-53.
- [11] Quigley, Austin. *Pinter, politics and postmodernism (1)*. The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter, Cambridge University Press, 2009: 7-26
- [12] Rufford, Juliet. "Disorder ... in a Darkened Room:" the Juridico-Political Space of *The Dumb Waiter*. *Harold Pinter's "The dumb waiter"*, Rodopi, 2009: 89-105
- [13] Pinter, Harold. *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948-2005*. Faber & Faber, 2005.