

## **Mode of Metatheater: The Mixture of Comic and Tragic in Harold Pinter's Dumb Waiter**

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### **Abstract**

The term metatheater is coined by Lionel Abel in 1963 which refers to theater about theater. It draws attention to the distinction between the fiction of the play and the reality of performance. A play refers to itself as a play to encourage the audience to perceive it in two ways; as a pretended reality and as dramatic artifice. Metatheater also appears in both comedy and tragedy, where the audience can laugh and empathize at the same time. The paradoxical perspective of fake and real promoting audience instability and this is the role of metatheater.

The conflict between illusion and reality is the bases of both the subject matter and the dramatic technique of the plays of Harold Pinter who is a revolutionary British playwright. This study examines Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (1959) in the light metatheatrical mode. The main concern of this study concentrates on Pinter's technique of mixing comedy and tragedy, how in this comedy Pinter leads the audience to the tragic sense, presenting a tragedy in modern absurd way.

### **Introduction**

The term metatheater is coined by Lionel Abel in 1963 which refers to theater about theater. It draws attention to the distinction between the fiction of the play and the reality of performance. A play refers to itself as a play to encourage the audience to perceive it in two ways; as a pretended reality and as dramatic artifice. Metatheater also appears in both comedy and tragedy, where the audience can laugh and empathize at the same time. The paradoxical perspective of fake and real promoting audience instability and this is the role of metatheater. In fact this new form is marked by a strong interrogation of the entire process of theater.

Many critics and writers made contribution to discuss the theory of metatheater. In *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, Richard Hornby offers insightful analyses of metadrama. He catalogues five forms of metadrama: play within play, ceremony within ceremony, role playing within a role, self-reference and literary and real life reference. He defines metadrama as a "drama about drama." (Richard Hornby, P.31) The forms that Hornby mentioned are important but metadrama is not limited to them. Abel believes that the concept of metadrama or metatheater goes beyond of specific forms or devices. He indicates that a metatheatrical plays

are “theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized.” (Lionel Abel. 134) Slawomir Swiontek is one of those who made important discussion of metatheater. He answers the two questions of the theatrical what and the metatheatrical how, applying quite a narrow initial definition to develop a surprisingly inclusive model for understanding metatheatrical events. He believes that in theater every passage to reality is a violation of truth. (Jenn Stephenson, P. 116-117) Metatheatrical plays shattered the traditional perspective of the stage as a real representation of truth. William Egginton argues that any theater is already a metatheater, in which there is an instant distinction between a real space and imaginary one that mirrors it, “that very distinction becomes an element to be incorporated as another distinction in the imaginary space’s work of mimesis”(P.74)) The real power of metatheater is that it draws the attention to the illusion of mind. We think that the reality is what we experience but not all what occurring is truth. We live in an illusion of reality based on how we perceive it.

For Martin Puchner, the term metatheater appears when modernism came to an end and critical studies started to explain modern art as a reflection of its nature. He thinks that it is the prelude of postmodernism which has been bound up with gesture of self-reflexivity.(P.51-52) Mary Ann in her book *Metatheater and Modernity: Baroque and Neobaroque* reexamines the concept of metatheater. She thinks that modernist and postmodernist metatheater plays resemble those of the seventeenth century in mixing tragic and comic mode, the difference is in perspective only. The difference is that the modernist and postmodernist playwrights try to penetrate illusion by tearing down the fourth wall of naturalism. (P. 137) Serious drama deals with social and political issues. And while socio-political plays often utilize both tragic and comic elements, there is no necessary organic relationship between them. Thus the effect of such plays, like that of the drama that “lies between the tragic and the comic rather than embracing both as tragicomedy does.” (Wett, P. 172) Abel thinks that it is only by undergoing tragedy one can feel the tragic sense of life. He states that one does not develop or realize the tragic sense, “but imposed; one never possesses it, one has to be possessed by” (Abel, 2003, P. 178) For Abel it is difficult to write modern tragedy as the philosophic form of drama evolved from Shakespeare to the present. Metatheater shows life as theater in which characters aware of their dramatic dimension. In metatheatrical moments, the world is treated as a “projection of human consciousness.” (Ibid, P.183) It is not as in tragedy imposed from without but it is performed spontaneously. The human imagination and dreams developed and changed continuously, do not stop in ultimate image. The role of metatheater is to evoke human imagination. In modern drama the tragic sense could be attained through comedic term.

Harold Pinter (1930 – 2008) had twenty nine major plays produced with massive success. Most of them produced more than one time. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He is one of the greatest playwrights like Samuel Becket, Edward Albee and Arthur Miller who have influence in twentieth century. (Peter Roby, Pp. xii-xix) Pinter’s plays are not metatheatrical in the same way of Luigi Pirandello whose *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is the chief modernist

example of metatheater but Pirandello's mixture of comic and tragic is common to Pinter's drama. Pinter tries to blend these opposed traditional genres; comedic and tragic. He believes that the reality of this life is that everything is funny even tragedy. He said that he reflects this reality in his plays, trying to "get this recognizable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak. This point about tragedy is that no longer funny. It is funny and then it becomes no longer funny." (Quoted in Martin Esslin, P242)

Pinter's comedy does not distance his audience from the tragic vision of life. Pinter believes that life is funny as it is based on illusion and self-deception. Pinter believes that there is a slight difference between what is real and unreal, "there are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal." (Ibid) He observes that nothing is certain, there is not necessarily either true or false, it can be both true and false. The facts and impressions come to us filtered through uncertain senses and that what is true for one person may be false for another. In his work the realistic aspects are the essence of the expressionistic elements. He thinks that in the meaninglessness of modern comedy there is "a kind of horror about and I think that this horror and absurdity go together." (Ibid) Pinter's comedy leads the audience to the inevitable and worst moment that one has to face. This study examines Pinter's technique in mixing comedic and tragic senses in *The Dumb Waiter*, how he evokes the unease and uncomfortable comic qualities and let the audience decide for themselves in metatheatrical moments.

### **The Dumb Waiter**

*The Dumb Waiter* is a short one-act play about two hit men who have an assignment to kill someone who will come at night. Gus and Ben waiting in a basement room for their target to enter. They have a task to kill an unknown target and they will be alerted to his arrival just before he enters the basement. Both Ben and Gus are dressed the same. Ben is laying in the bed reading a newspaper while Gus is sitting on the other bed trying to tie his shoelace with difficulty. They both engaged in complaining the room and waiting the messages of the figure of power. The dumb waiter arrives with unexpected order which is for food. The dumb waiter comes up empty several times until the two men send up what food they brought. A voice rejects the food. They still receive a series of food orders which they cannot fill. While Gus is out Ben receives the awaited order. He calls Gus but when Gus enters stripped of his coat and gun, Ben levels his gun at him. One of the killers becomes the intended victim.

On the surface the plot is realistic of real people who are representatives of the working class but underneath it there is a complex implication revealing the truth that cannot be observed superficially. The setting of the play is also realistic, true to life, a closed room with two people and a door which opens outside; a room with two beds and a door to the kitchen and another to a passage. Mark Taylor Batty observes that the room is a symbol of Gus's dilemma who is imprisoned in this dark room. He is arriving and departing during the night. He is uncertain of anything outside and unable to go and see what is there. He is so confused looking for

information to know in which city he is. "It is an apt decor for these two men, blinded by duty and bling to the increasingly apparent truth" (P. 17) This room is their world which is surrounded by the hostile and mystery.

Like most of Pinter's plays, this play takes place in one setting as if it is a prison for the characters, they cannot leave or they are afraid to leave. It is difficult to revitalize the audience in a single location, the audience may feel unease and uncomfortable because of the lack of variation, a repetitive action that occurs in one single space, but it seems that Pinter tries to involve the audience with the dilemma of Gus and Ben which is the dilemma of modern man who is absorbed with illusion.

The play opens with the two characters who look like puppets playing their role on the stage. Ben looks more superior than Gus. Ben is reading a newspaper and telling incredible stories from newspaper. The first story is about an old man who is eighty seven wanted to cross the road but there was a lot of traffic and crawled under a lorry. Gus asks many questions enquiring knowledge :

GUS. He what?

BEN. He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.

GUS. No?

BEN. The lorry started and ran over him.

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. (P. 119)

There are facts in this opening sequence written in black and white, like the newspaper, but nothing is certain. The quick rhythms of their exchange are typical of the Pinteresque and the entire play. Ben, the informer, gives us facts from his newspaper, and Gus receives the information and responds. From the beginning it seems that Ben and Gus are odds. Gus is

uncertain of anything and subservient partner who keeps asking questions. They fill the stage with the tension of questions which are unanswered. Anne Luyat believes that the “oppositional structure as seen in the dialogues between Gus and Ben invite the audience to both laugh and cry, to believe and disbelieve, thus creating a relentless dynamic of opposing forces that will soon end in violence.” (P. 236) Both Ben and Gus are offended by what happened to the old man but Ben tries to hid his feeling while Gus keeps questioning the possibility of that event in the society. He is looking for the cause, the origin or motivation by asking. Those questions seem to be irrelevant and meaningless, and “whose threat is ordinary on the surface but lethal in reality” (Almansi, P. 38) The play is dramatic as well as absurd, as Pinter explores the idea of humanity facing a mysterious universe. Gus tension and fear which appear in his movement on the stage and his questions represent modern man uncertainty that obtain his mind waiting for release and redemption.

Robert Gordon claims that Ben passes his eyes over the newspaper pages and stops aimlessly and chooses stories randomly. He argues that Ben chooses any story randomly as he has more notable stories than the ones that he reads to Gus. (P.203) Francesca Coppa does not agree with Gordon that Ben chooses his stories randomly. He states that Ben stories are like Freud’s joke teller. The Freud’s joke-telling is a joke that is constructed like a theatrical event, and is verbalized for the purpose of pleasing or impressing an audience. If this were not the case, there would be no significant in saying the joke loudly. The joke-maker could simply think his amusing thoughts for his own pleasure. The fact that the joke-maker’s effort of telling the joke is to create a relationship with someone else. Coppa adds that Ben deliberately reads the stories loudly to announce something that he could keep to himself, since people read newspaper silently. In fact Ben insists to read loudly to make a particular impression on Gus. (P. 45) In a metatheatrical mode, in mixing comedic sense and tragic sense, Pinter wants to see the audience reaction on Ben’s stories which are about death but at the same time they are performed in a comedic technique by repeating meaningless words and silly questions. Gus who is offended by the death of the old man and at the same time he loughs over the stupidity of the killers. The audience become part of the play, joining Gus and listening and interacting with Ben stories.

Pinter uses comic technique like repetition and physical farce like Gus and Ben’s frantic interaction. This comedic technique is not only for pleasure but it is crucial. It leads the meaning and the theme of the play. Pinter’s work also tends to be sacred jokes that “reproduce the larger play in microcosm: Pinter uses the tendentious joke structure on the micro level as well as the macro.” (Ibid) The audience may not find the play as funny and does not make them laugh. This means that the audience empathize with the victim over victimizer. More precisely this may not make the audience side with victim but make them interact and have part of the play. In *The Dumb Waiter*, Pinter relates the microcosm of Ben and Gus’ basement room to the macrocosm of the outside mysterious world. Ben and Gus live in a miserable condition, they are unable to make sense inside the microcosm and macrocosm. Pinter breaks the forth wall

that is explicitly to contain fiction within its microcosm. This is metadrama; a series of storytelling techniques that draw attention to a text's status, working together to self-consciously expose its means of representation. The characters, with their pointless attitudes and unexpected interactions, are introduced as isolated from the external world. The paradox characterizing their language exchange makes them look dark people live in circle where there is no safe place neither inside nor outside. They are entrapped in the experience of illusion of everyday life, of deceptions and contradictions, and of loneliness and despair. In metatheatrical moments Pinter reveals the reality of the existence of modern man by displaying a pessimistic microcosm which is threatened by macrocosm world where identity fades away in illusion.

Ambiguity characterizes Pinter's work as he wants his audience to live with his characters. He says "Between lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which is compulsory to explore." (Pinter, 1977, P. 10) He wants the audience to imagine and explore the layers between the ambiguity of the characters and the ambiguity of their talk. The lack of communication between Ben and Gus and the lack of information about the characters that we do not know their jobs or their relationship till the end of the play, heighten the ambiguity of the play. Ben never clearly answers any of Gus's questions, choosing instead to give out an extract of information or avoiding the question. Besides the lack of communication between Ben and Gus, there is also the false communication they receive through the dumb waiter and the twelve matches. This communication is not explained at all throughout the play, and adds to the confusion of the audience.

Towards the end of the play, Pinter repeats the same story and as usual the content of the story is meaningless, what is important is the structure, and the reality bitterness it reveals. Ben repeats telling the story that he has tolled at the beginning:

Ben: Kaw!

He picks up the paper and looks at it.

Listen to this!

Pause.

Kaw! What about that, eh?

Pause.

Have you ever heard such a thing?

Gus: (dully) Go on.

Ben: It's true.

Gus: Get away.

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

Gus: (very low) Is that a fact?

Ben: Can you imagine it.

Gus: It's unbelievable.

Ben: It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?

Gus: (almost inaudible) Incredible. (P. 146)

The repetition technique in *The Dumb Waiter* is part of the cyclical nature of life and the lack of action that bores the audience and draws their attention to the illusion of the apparent reality. The repetition technique is a comedic technique but it tells that tragedy of the death of the old man. This time Ben does not mention the old man as if Pinter wants the audience to fill in the gap and explore what is unexplored.

At the end of *The Dumb Waiter* when Gus goes to drink a glass of water, Ben is given the order to kill him. Throughout the play Ben looks the superior who is secure in his knowledge that it would be another job to be performed so when he is given the order to kill his partner he does not hesitate, he "takes out a comb and combs his hair, adjusts his jacket to diminish the bulge of the revolver," and mechanically turns his gun towards Gus. Anne Luyat notes that the comic sense has disappeared at the end of the play when it is revealed that Gus is the victim, "his initial disregard for the sense of foreboding hidden in the dark stories of the death read to him by Ben constitute in retrospect a dramatic foreshadowing of his tragic disbelief in his own morality." (Anne Luyat, P. 238) In metatheatrical moments blending comic and tragic elements, Pinter reveals the illusion which controls everything, including the characters' lives. He evokes the audience to expect what is unexpected by introducing incomprehensible world. *The Dumb Waiter* has many things that are ambiguous, not easy to understand. The false communication between Ben and Gus, Ben never clearly answers any of Gus's questions, choosing instead to give out a piece of information or avoiding the question, all that confused the audience. These ambiguity of information makes the audience more confused at the end of the play when Ben turns his gun towards Gus, than at the beginning. This confusion hides an invisible menace with moments of high recognition.

## Conclusion

The Dumb Waiter reflects Pinter's comic style of long pauses and sparse, a dialogue hiding an invisible menace with moments of high comedy which allows a laugh or to relieve dramatic tension. The play represents fiction of self-conscious, a form of storytelling in which imagination becomes aware of its own artificiality. Though The Dumb Waiter is generally designed as realistic, Pinter presents the tragedy of modern man in absurdist way. Pinter's characters are conscious of their artificial identities and draw attention to it throughout performance. The ambiguity of their talk and their role is to evoke the audience to explore what is unexplored. In a play based on question which has no beginning and no middle, the characters move from harmony to disharmony and tension and penetrate the illusion of their life. Metatheater is exploited in The Dumb Waiter to penetrate the boundaries between illusion and reality and break down the gap between the performer and the audience. Metatheatrical moment in The Dumb Waiter is concentrated on mingling comic and tragic senses without clear distinction between them. Pinter makes the audience laugh on their tragic reality. Here the laughter is the uncomfortable kind born of recognition.

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