

Pinter's Penal Panopticon

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Creating literature that not only holds a sense of moral truth but also promotes an awareness of social concerns, Harold Pinter reflects on the role of the individual in society. Reminiscent of literary giants such as Sartre and Beckett, Pinter uses abstract political commentary contained in his earlier works to address many of the current issues we, as citizens of a prominent world power, face today. Through his early period of "menace comedies," a term coined by drama critic Irving Wardle to describe Pinter's dramatic style, Pinter gives us characters trapped under a watchful eye, often at the whim of an unknown power or force, as in two plays indicative of Pinter's style and themes, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*. By contrasting these two key Pinter texts and their stage realizations, one can see how, in the language of Michel Foucault, Pinter's "panoptic vision" can be understood as social commentary, a dramatic enactment where the individual is a site of struggle in the continual circulation of power.

In many ways, Pinter's representations can be equated with Michael Foucault's concept of a societal "panopticon," or the thing that isolates individuals under a gaze without a specific subject: the duty station in a prison, for example, at which the guard sits, privy to all of the prison space but outside the inmate's gaze or, to offer another example, the monitor behind a surveillance camera watching over the gaming floor of a casino. Yet, when trying to understand how the power dynamic operates in Pinter's world under the gaze of the unseen Other, we must consider how Foucault identifies the relationship between discipline/power and the individual. As Neve Gordon suggests in "Foucault's Subject: An Ontological Reading," "...the individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces..." essentially, "Discipline 'makes' individuals" (Gordon 398). The environment defines the individual in *The Dumb Waiter*, since both Ben and

Gus's characters are effectively defined by the power Wilson holds over them despite the lack of any direct contact. In the end of the play, as the tension created by Wilson's orders increases to a breaking point, Gus snaps under the pressure causing Ben to respond in a similar fashion:

Gus: What's he doing it for? We've been through our tests, haven't we? We got right through our tests, years ago, didn't we? We took them together, don't you remember, didn't we? We proved ourselves before now, haven't we? We've always done our job. What's he doing all this for? What's the idea? What's he playing all these games for?
WE'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?
(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!

While the two characters argue throughout the play, this is the peak of violently physical interaction. Although the dumbwaiter is the catalyst of the tension, Gus's frustration is caused by his desire to understand why the orders are coming down while Ben is desperately trying to avoid any type of conflict with the panoptic force upstairs. Filled with seeming banter, these plays, in their economical use of language and many staggering allusions, bring the reader to contemplate the nature of power and the role authority plays in all of our lives. Thus, Pinter's complexity and social relevance can best be understood by using the analogy of the penal panopticon, an analogue largely overlooked in Pinter criticism.

The majority of the critical essays on Pinter's political perspective deal with more recent issues such as the Iraq war, Serbia and Kosovo, and Central and South America since they tend to be the subject of his most recent publications. Yet, little criticism deals with his more abstract

concepts, such as social control and responsibility, illustrated in his earlier works from the late fifties and early sixties. For instance, Janis Froelich's review of the cinematic production of *The Dumb Waiter* reads as follows:

Harold Pinter's one act play, originally produced in London in 1960, has a bizarre premise:

Hitmen Ben and Gus wait in the kitchen of a deserted lodging house for their next victim. They engage in idle banter to pass the time when suddenly strange messages, mostly orders for food, begin to appear via the dumbwaiter or small elevator. Who they are sent to murder is revealed at the end of the story, but the dumbwaiter has a most ghostlike influence on the fingering. (1)

Although the plot is neatly summarized, Froelich doesn't make a single mention of the allegorical purpose of using a dumbwaiter to provide orders or even connect the name 'dumbwaiter' to how both men are 'dumbly' waiting for their next instructions before they can act. Froelich closes her review by suggesting the ending of the movie "...is so sad and biting, yet the very last frames wring one final chuckle from the viewer" which misses the significance of placing Ben and Gus at odds with each other (2).

While other critics are able to interpret the profound political nature of the play, reviewers are seldom able to grasp the catalyst of Pinter's intense message. Bryce Hallett, in viewing a recent Australian production, describes Pinter as:

Lay(ing) down a precise, meticulous foundation for his "two men in a room" word play, one where language and meaning are debated, and where the domestic and familiar come to offer little comfort in the overall scheme of things. It is the unseen authority and unknowable forces that Pinter plants outside his room that cause his characters- and the audience- to feel anxious. (1)

While Hallett cannot quite make out how the tension is derived from the dumbwaiter, he is on the right track in identifying the authority in the play as originating from the mysterious "Wilson" who creates the tension between Ben and Gus without ever physically appearing.

While early reviews of *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* have described the plays as "An hour's worth of sheer, rich fun" (Carpenter 113), Charles Grimes views Pinter's work as having a political sub-theme beyond that of pure entertainment.

Pinter's theater.. .features plays that demand interpretation in terms of the realities of public politics. The early plays in this (early) period have a stylistic brevity that is the key to their political vision. They offer precise yet resonant images of ruthless power in the act of silencing and destroying dissenting individuals.. .these plays may nevertheless break through intellectual knowledge to a present at least an intimation of what it would be to directly experience political oppression. (72) In his book *Harold Pinter's Politics*, Grimes addresses the similarities between Foucault's Panopticon and the power relationships between Ben, Gus, and the "dumb waiter," exploring how the mysterious and controlling "Wilson" character is symbolic of the discipline implemented by the control center of the panopticon. As Grimes explains:

From later experience in the play, Gus and Ben learn they are under observation. Though this oversight is intermittent, it has the same effect on them as constant surveillance. Gus and Ben come to realize they are subject to power even when the action of power is not visible or present. Gus's experience confirms that there is no escape from this disciplinary system of power. (52)

Grimes believes the actual dumb waiter is more than just a symbol: an allegorical representation of the structure of power implemented in Jeremy Bentham's prison facility; a tangible rendition

of the panopticon. "What the Panopticon attempts in Bentham's imaginary prison, the dumbwaiter performs in Pinter's play; both create loyal subjects through observation and discipline." (53)

However, *The Dumb Waiter* isn't the only predominantly political play in Pinter's canon; Grimes makes the argument that *The Birthday Party* is equally political in respect to the control employed over Stanley, represented by Goldberg and McCann's organization. Although panoptic characteristics are evident in how the 'organization' is never visualized or revealed, *The Birthday Party*, as Grimes suggests, can be interpreted based on "...its evocations of subjugation, torture and ethnic identity, (which) provokes confrontation with Pinter's political turn." (38) Essentially each play is an experiment; *The Dumb Waiter* illustrates what happens when fear-based control is internalized, effectively eliminating any type of check or balance to limit the abuse of power while *The Birthday Party* explores the capabilities of this controlling entity when no limitations are in place, leading to such atrocities as the Holocaust and the conflicts in Serbia and Kosovo.

While much of the criticism of Pinter's earlier plays revolves around the actual content of the scripts, it generally ignores the fact that he was exploring a new way to present theatre. In her critique of his unique film style, Gay Cima suggests Pinter "treats each dramatic scene as a shot or statement that may be posited in various ways against a competing statement," which explains why traditional critics rejected the format of his earlier works (Cima 44). Few Pinter critics take into account the crucial fact that Pinter is not writing within the familiar structure of dramatic theatre but blending literary and cinematographic techniques. The effect isolates each interaction as do shot-by-shot takes speed up in the films of Geoffrey Reggio or accelerated, contrasting montage. This fact accounts for the initially poor reviews of Pinter's earlier productions. Even in modern renditions of *The Dumb Waiter*, critics reviewed the play according to the criteria for a

classic drama rather than noting his innovative style focused on character's positioning, both physically on the stage and mentally through their dialogue. This is significant to understanding Pinter since, as Keith Cohen explains in his book *Film and Fiction*, "subject and object are part of the same living and playing space; the distance, as well as the angle of vision, between the two (actor and spectator) remains static, while in film these spatial relations are extremely dynamic." Although Pinter's background is primarily as an actor and playwright, his fascination with converting books and scripts to cinematic productions is evident in how the physical interaction of his characters supports the power struggle within the dialogue in both *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*.

A strong supporter of literature that not only holds a sense of moral truth but promotes an awareness of social concerns, Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* uses subtle allusions and a minimalist perspective to obfuscate any one clear interpretation of the political connotations contained in his play. Reaching a single interpretation is further complicated due to the elusiveness of a concrete definition of literary minimalism, yet the technique is best described as "An economy with words and a focus on surface description. Readers are expected to take an active role in the creation of a story, to 'choose sides' based on oblique hints and innuendo, rather than reacting to directions from the author." Through his simplistic dialogue and his specific stage directions, Pinter provides more information about the main characters Ben and Gus in the first two pages of the play than he could possibly directly describe to the reader. Primarily due to his inquisitive nature, Gus is portrayed as the bumbling child of the pair who would be lost without the guidance of the 'fatherly' Ben who calmly sits and reads his paper, yet there is a tendency for audiences to identify with Gus's character due to his innocent likeability. When questioned about his creative process, Pinter replied that he simply places characters in a

setting and records how they interact with each other to get a realistic sense of dialogue and action. He does exactly this with Ben, Gus, and Wilson; exploring the effects of a governing body on two opposing social mentalities.

Despite the fact that the first two pages contain few physical actions or descriptions that are pertinent to the plot, Pinter thoroughly describes both characters and their relationship with each other through stage directions and seemingly pointless small talk. The first page illustrates a minimalist set with both men sitting on their respective beds; Ben reading his paper while Gus fumbles with his shoe as he tries to extract a pack of matches. In this first scene, Pinter depicts Ben as a mature, sensible member of society who is more concerned with current events than his current surroundings. Gus on the other hand fidgets as a small child would in a doctor's waiting room:

Ben is lying on a bed, left, reading a paper. Gus is sitting on a bed, right, tying his shoelaces, with difficulty...

Gus ties his laces, rises, yawns and begins to walk slowly to the door, left. He stops, looks down, and shakes his foot.

Ben lowers his paper and watches him. Gus kneels and unties his shoe-lace and slowly takes off his shoe. He looks inside it and brings out a flattened matchbox. He shakes it and examines it. Their eyes meet. Ben rattles his paper and reads...

Gus walks to the door, left, stops, and shakes the other foot. He kneels, unties his shoe-lace, and slowly takes off the shoe. He looks inside it and brings out a flattened cigarette packet... Ben rattles his paper and reads. (Gus) wanders off, left. Ben slams his paper down on the bed and glares after him.

Seemingly content with sitting and reading, Ben becomes increasingly annoyed as Gus wanders into the bathroom; the noise of the lavatory irritates him further. Pinter foreshadows the conflict between the two characters in the first page of description; Ben's paper is symbolic of how he desires to be a functioning member of society despite his employment as an assassin while Gus' matches in his shoe illustrate how he doesn't quite fit in to his surroundings and his inquisitive nature desires to know why. This conflict becomes evident later in the play when the two enter into a physical altercation when Gus' curious nature conflicts with Ben's desire to fit in.

The tension between the two is evident before either character says a word to each other. Ben finally breaks the silence by bringing to Gus' attention an article he was reading about an elderly man who died after crawling under a truck while trying to cross the street.

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: Its 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.

Silence

Gus shakes his head and exits. Ben lies back and reads.

While the irony of two professional killers expressing shock and disbelief at a man being killed in an accident is intentionally comical and suggests that even killers are functioning members of society, this short interaction further describes the two characters: Ben is annoyed at the man's stupidity rather than sympathetic; whereas, Gus shows some concern but, more importantly, he is inquisitive about the whole situation. This relationship reoccurs throughout the play, as Ben's frustration with Gus' curious nature escalates:

Ben: What's the matter with you? You're always asking me questions. What's the matter with you?

Gus: Nothing.

Ben: You never used to ask me so many damn questions. What's come 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?

Gus: That's what I was wondering about.

Ben: What? Gus: The job. Ben: What job?

Gus: (Tentatively) I thought perhaps you might know something.

Ben looks at him

I thought perhaps you - I mean - have you got any idea - who it's going to be tonight?

At this point in the play, Ben and Gus represent two opposing political perspectives. Gus is discontent with his static position in society; therefore becoming curious about what the surrounding unknown world has to offer. Whereas Ben is content with following instructions, Gus has to know the reasoning behind their orders and struggles with simply acting as a pawn for their unseen boss, Wilson. Ben illustrates the type of person that Pinter identifies as the catalyst of our political troubles today. He would rather live a life of ignorance than run the risk of destroying his meager yet stable position in society by asking for explanations of his orders. Ben manages to do this by isolating himself from the surrounding world through "keeping himself busy" by reading his paper or building models. Gus is the exact opposite: aware of both himself and his surroundings he notices small things like the time it takes for the toilet to fill in the bathroom and the quality of the crockery in the small flat. However, his constant inspection of his surroundings only seems to annoy Ben who chastises Gus for having too much spare time:

Ben: You know what your trouble is?

Gus: What?

Ben: You haven't got any interests.

Gus: I've got interests.

Ben: What? Tell me one of your interests.

Pause

Gus: I've got interests.

Ben: Look at me. What have I got?

Gus: I don't know. What?

Ben: I have my woodwork. I've got my model boats. Have you ever seen me idle? I'm never idle. I know how to occupy my time, to its best advantage. Then when a call comes, I'm ready. Gus: Don't you ever get a bit fed up? Ben: Fed up? What with? *Silence*

Ben reads. Gus feels in the pocket of his jacket, which hangs on the bed.

Ben uses small tasks to keep his mind from focusing on the psychological impact of his job as a hired killer. That's why he's always "ready when a call comes" and has no trouble viewing this job as he would any other legitimate profession. Yet when Gus forces him to consider the mental consequences of killing people by asking him if he ever gets fed up, Ben shrugs off the question and retreats behind his paper.

Although he appears to be the more mature of the two, his "self-control" is derived from his fear of the unknown. We see this when both characters interact with the dumb waiter for the first time:

Gus (reading): Soup of the day. Liver and onions. Jam tart. *A pause. Gus looks at Ben. Ben takes the note and reads it. He walks slowly to the hatch. Gus follows. Ben looks into the hatch but not up it. Gus puts his hand on Ben's shoulder. Ben throws it off. Gus puts his finger to his mouth. He leans on the hatch and swiftly looks up it. Ben flings him away in alarm. Ben looks at the note. He throws his revolver on the bed and speaks with decision.*

Ben: We'd better send something up.

Curious as to the nature of this unseen power, Gus chooses to gather as much information as possible about what is controlling them while Ben only looks into the box to make sure that they didn't miss any orders. As Gus leans forward to look up the chute, Ben immediately restrains him out of fear of angering whoever is upstairs. He expresses no desire to know anything about their situation but would rather blindly do as he is told, causing as little trouble as possible in the process. Several lines later, he again becomes anxious at the possibility that Gus will interact with the man upstairs:

Ben (purposefully): Quick! What have you got in that bag?

Gus: Not much.

Gus goes to the hatch and shouts up it.

Wait a minute!

Ben: Don't do that!

Although he has no idea if speaking up the dumb waiter will cause trouble, Ben assumes it isn't worth risking and again yells at Gus out of fear of the unknown.

The clash of these two perspectives reaches a climax instigated by the mysterious character upstairs that sends extravagant food orders periodically through the dumb waiter, a box that travels through a chute in the wall and is used to deliver items from the kitchen to the dining room above. As the orders become more complex, Gus' curiosity grows as does Ben's desire to follow the orders without incident. Gus is unable to stand the mystery behind the orders and snaps; shouting "WE HAVE NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" up the speaking tube of the dumb waiter, causing Ben to assault him out of fear of angering the unknown person upstairs. This clash illustrates the power Wilson holds over the two men; causing them both such angst that friend turns on friend rather than uniting against their unseen

antagonist. This fact has much more of a political impact when placed in the context of the time period in which it was written: as Grimes suggests, "The name Wilson can be taken as a political reference either to Woodrow Wilson, who promised to fight World War I to make the world safe for democracy, or to the Labor Party's Harold Wilson—two politicians Pinter might have reason to view with contempt" (223). Although the meaning behind Wilson's name has become dated, the ending of the play makes a quite a critical statement about the resulting effects of the panoptic leadership used in Britain during the first War.

After this tense interaction, both Ben and Gus relax a bit and the set returns to how the play opened, with Ben reading his paper and Gus sitting in silence. The only difference is a palpable tension in the air between the two assassins. While Gus again stands up to leave the room for a drink of water, Ben receives orders through the dumb waiter the moment he leaves the room. The man upstairs gives Ben the go-ahead to complete the job and as Ben prepares to assassinate the next person to walk through the door, he finds himself face to face with Gus, stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and revolver. Both men stare at each other in amazement as the curtain closes. As the friends come face to face with each other, Pinter puts Ben's priorities to the test. Which is more important to him, his desire to fit in and please someone he hardly knows or the life of his friend? Although Pinter does not answer this question, his point is clear: where do we draw the line with taking responsibilities for our actions? Ben has no trouble killing someone he doesn't know simply because someone higher up told him it was ok, but the second that he has a recognizable face to go with the person he is killing, he hesitates. He is forced to think about the results of his actions rather than just complete his job and go home. Pinter dares his audience to consider how their actions affect others on a global level rather than only consider themselves.

In his film adaptation of *The Dumb Waiter*, Robert Altman presents a modified concept of Pinter's panopticon which primarily focuses on the power struggle between characters while the relationship between the two assassins and Wilson is presented as a secondary sub-theme. This variation is an effort to simplify the plot as to broaden the appeal to a general audience since, as numerous negative reviews of various productions have illustrated; decoding Pinter's complex allusions is not an easy feat for those unfamiliar with the political commentary surrounding his work. However, the presence of panoptic power is undeniable: the dumb waiter is still the catalyst for all the action in the movie and the characters still only act once they are given orders from upstairs. This is supported by the physical changes to the room in which the two killers wait; Altman chose a larger set, much more complex than what Pinter envisioned in his script. Both characters enter through a door that immediately leads down a short stairwell, opening up into a large, dank room partitioned off in one corner by a caged enclosure. The most noticeable aspect about the enclosure is how prison like the caged area is; the walls extend completely to the ceiling, with the only way in or out through a small opening protected by a caged door of the same material. Rather than placing the dumb waiter in the wall, Altman places the metal chute in the middle of the set; exposed to three hundred and sixty degrees of the room. Essentially, the room is a physical representation of a circular prison structure with both Ben and Gus caged inside a small corner of the room; the dumb waiter is essentially the panopticon behind which Wilson hides yet is privy to an omniscient viewpoint of the entire room. The similarities between the dumb waiter and panopticon are furthered in how the dumb waiter interpolates into the scene at such specific moments which suggest that the operator is certainly watching the entire room from an unseen vantage point. Every time Ben and Gus's arguments become too heated or Gus comes to a solid realization about the nature of the organization for

which they work, the piercing squeak of the descending box interrupts the dialogue, drawing all attention away from the previous subject. For instance, as Gus laments about the girl they killed on their last job which infuriates Ben, the clatter of the dumb waiter causes both characters to stop arguing and derails Gus's thought process as he is about to express the psychological impact of the assassination. This is one of the few direct threats to the organization since, if Ben begins to explore the moral aspects of his work rather than ignore them through his woodworking and newspaper, he wouldn't be able to shoot Gus with no remorse. The precision of the dumb waiter's interjections is further illustrated in how easily Gus is disarmed; as the last order is sent down, Gus reaches for the slip of paper and sets his gun down in the dumb waiter next to where the paper sat. The very moment he is distracted while trying to read the paper, the dumb waiter ascends with his weapon as if the operator was watching his every move.

Altaian even makes some creative changes to the script to reinforce the power dynamic; strengthening the presence of "The Organization" that Ben and Gus work for in order to create an easily identifiable antagonist. He adjusts the stage directions by having Gus place his gun on the tray of the dumb waiter when he reaches for the final food order, only to have the dumb waiter rise up again, effectively disarming him and leaving a wildly confused Gus to stumble through the final scenes of the movie.

At the end of the play, Altaian does make one major change which alters the effectiveness of Pinter's panoptic vision: as Gus stumbles through the door, stripped of his jacket, tie and weapon, he comes face to face with Ben who shoots him and then drives off, passing the cleanup crew in a van on his way out of the long driveway. While an audience obviously needs some type of closure at the end of the play, much of the strength of Pinter's message is derived from the scene ending with Ben and Gus in a standoff, the result of which is

left up to the viewer to decide. Through leaving the play unresolved, the audience is forced to play out the potential options based on what they learned about the characters during the play; creating an open dialogue about the nature of the two political perspectives even after the show is over which substantially increases the effectiveness of Pinter's message as individuals consider his panoptic concept outside the theatrical context.

While William Friedkin's cinematic rendition of *The Birthday Party* doesn't use such an obvious physical replica of the panopticon, he employs several elements which illustrate Pinter's panoptic view of Goldberg and McCann's mysterious "organization"; much like Altaian's rendition of *The Dumb Waiter*. In the second act of the original script of *The Birthday Party*, Pinter has all the characters standing in the dark as they make a birthday toast to Stanley, yet he does not designate particular positions in the room to his characters. In his production, Friedkin places Goldberg and McCann on the far side of the room, facing the camera, while everyone else is standing to either side of the screen as they face the two men with the flashlight. This choice of camera angle causes McCann's flashlight to effectively blind everyone in the room, including the viewers, while both men stand privy to everyone in the room under the gaze of the torch; essentially placing the two men within a panopticon. This representation is reinforced by the fact that both men are agents of an unseen organization, much like Wilson in *The Dumb Waiter*, yet the audience or characters never see any direct evidence of its existence; rather they only react to the fear instilled by the unknown. This fear is realized within moments of Goldberg and McCann's appearance onto the set; McCann immediately expresses discomfort at the chance they could be at the wrong house:

McCann: Is this it?

Goldberg: This is it.

McCann: Are you sure?

Goldberg: Sure I'm sure.

Pause

McCann: What now?

Goldberg: Don't worry yourself, McCann. Take a seat.

McCann: What about you?

As the junior member of the two, McCann is quite terrified about how the organization will react if he makes a mistake and is obviously jumpy about the nature of this particular job. When Goldberg inquires as to his nervous nature, he replies: "I don't know, Nat. I'm just all right once I know what I'm doing. When I know what I'm doing, I'm alright". This statement suggests that McCann is uncomfortable acting on his own when he has no orders; possibly because he has the chance to reflect on the nature of his work and is discomfited by what he does for the organization much like Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*. Friedkin accentuates this fact in his film where McCann lapses into a look of dismay whenever he is left alone for a few moments; appearing to experience some inner torment when left to his own devices.

As Harold Pinter illustrates in both *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*, Michael Foucault's panoptic vision is the source of the fear which motivates the characters in both these plays to act as they do. When interpreted as social commentary, Pinter's two plays are a dramatic enactment where the individual is a site of struggle in the continual circulation of power instigated by the panoptic nature of the governing bodies. Through these two works, he illustrates the dangers of blindly following orders while ignoring the repercussions of those very actions; resulting in such atrocities as murder and torture. By reducing individuals to simple "agents" of a panoptic, governing body, they lose the need to justify the immorality of their job

since someone is always watching to inform them what is right and wrong. Although this panoptic mechanism is often ignored by most critics, both Robert Altman and William Friedkin's respective cinematic interpretations successfully capture the presence of a panoptic force, illustrating the existence of Foucault's concept in both these plays.

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