



Waiting as Domination in Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*

Muhd. Mustafizur Rahman¹ & Mostak Hossain²

¹ Associate Professor, Department of English, Bangladesh Army University of Engineering & Technology, Qadirabad Cantonment, Natore-6431, Bangladesh

Email: mustafizsiu@yahoo.com

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bangladesh Army University of Engineering & Technology, Qadirabad Cantonment, Natore-6431, Bangladesh

Correspondence: Mostak Hossain, Bangladesh Army University of Engineering & Technology, Bangladesh

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6572-978X>

Email: mostak024@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study explores the role of waiting in Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) and its effect on creating obedience in the characters trapped inside a bureaucratic system. The research aims to uncover the ideological function of enforced duration as a technique of domination, extending existing readings of the play beyond language and institutional discipline toward a properly sociological account of time. The paper focuses on the play's genre, language, silence and central prop as forms of temporal domination with the help of close textual analysis that draws from Pierre Bourdieu's (2000) theory of waiting, Javier Auyero's (2012) work on bureaucratic delay and Harold Schweizer's (2008) work on duration. The analysis shows that the obedience of Ben and Gus is not due to discourse or surveillance alone, but is the result of an administered waiting that undermines the capacity to question authority; the play's unresolved ending is not open to interpretation, but confirms the effect. This work contributes to Pinter scholarship by proving *The Dumb Waiter's* (1960) dramatic exploration of power is a dramatisation of unequal distribution of time, and provides an approach applicable to a wider understanding of absurdist drama and institutional control.

Keywords: The Dumb Waiter, Pierre Bourdieu, Waiting, Temporal Power, Theatre of the Absurd

Introduction

Two hired killers, Ben and Gus, spend the entire action of the play in the basement with no windows in Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (1960). They wait for orders, for the

kettle to boil, to wait for the hatch above them to call for the impossible next feed, to wait for the door to open, to the task they have been assigned to perform. The play happens to be structured without a steady temporal anchor: there is not a clock on stage, there is not a set arrival time set until the closing minutes, and the audience, like the characters, must take steps to come to understand the passage of time, through repetition, digression, and delay. As an absurdist condition, according to the general criticism from Martin Esslin (2001), or as Foucauldian institutional discipline in action via language and self-surveillance (Foucault, 1995). Both versions are accepted, and, as some new research has suggested, the merging of them is not a new one on the play. But a rather more exacting sociological question was not so much given as put: what is the nature, in a fairly literal sociological description, of these men's attitude to authority, which is first of all one in which the man who has to show up does not have to show up at all? This question is given a precise vocabulary by Pierre Bourdieu's (2000) later work on symbolic power. Bourdieu contends that waiting is an expression of submission, and that he or she who can make someone else wait, without cause and without a final goal, knows what power is: in practice, it is the power of a felt hierarchy, of a lived powerlessness. On this score, time is not a neutral backdrop to which power just happens to apply. It is itself something the powerful deny, limit and allocate and the powerless sense that the powerless's bodies are being rationed in advance of any order. This article contends that *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) dramatises not only this structure but that the play can be read sociologically, alongside reading it in terms of discourse and institutional discipline, and that in this latter way, the language, the silences, and the central prop of the play can be shown to be doing something. There is the absurd waiting of the tramps, which awaits a figure that might never materialise in Beckett's plays, and the contentful waiting of the basement, where the tramps await an invisible and therefore non-existent source of power, a difference that points to the play's description of what kind of power it is.

The argument follows three steps, one for each of the three sections of the discussion below. The absurdist form of the play is not just a Beckettian simulation of cosmic uncertainty; it is an administered uncertainty, one that has a certain origin buried in the depth of waiting but not entirely concealed. Second, the men's verbal quarrels and Pinter's famous silences are not independent sites of meaning but are means of controlling the passage of time, for the language determines who is to talk and when and how long, and silence assumes the form of a withheld time on stage. Thirdly, the dumb waiter is not just a symbol of bureaucracy, but also a form of clock: one that sets tempo and demands synchronisation, and which is obeyed in the play's under-resolved conclusion. These claims, together, shift the play's argument about power from the register of discourse, where Pinter scholarship has emerged more or less solidified, to the register of time, which is significantly under-examined. The paper proceeds by placing this reading in the context of the work that led up to it, by outlining the theoretical framework and methodology of

the reading, by outlining the genre of the play, the language of the play, the importance of silence, the relevance of the dumb waiter as an object, and the role of the play's conclusion, and by summarizing the reading's broader implications.

Literature Review

The Dumb Waiter (1960) is included in biographical studies of Pinter's career as a playwright. Michael Billington's (2007) biography shows the play's initial critical reception and its subsequent recognition as a formal achievement that anticipates concerns which would go on to dominate Pinter's later, more overtly political, work: concerns of surveillance and interrogation which Pinter's own experience of precarious employment, cramped lodging, and the early 1970s political climate shaped. The paper follows the broader evolution of Pinter criticism outlined by Susan Hollis Merritt (1990) as a move from formalist work on the technique of absurdist theatre to more politically motivated readings, and it further develops that shift from a focus on discourse centred readings to a sociological approach to time. Each of Harold Bloom's (1987) edited collection brings together the decades of shorter interventions in psychoanalytical, sociological, linguistic, and theatrical studies, respectively, and each of Martin S. Regal's (1995) and Austin E. Quigley's (1975) sustained treatments of time, structure, and communicative failure across Pinter's oeuvre treats time more as a structural device than a mechanism of domination in its own right.

There are three general categories of scholarship related to *The Dumb Waiter* (1960). The first is to read the play in terms of Esslin's (2001) *Theatre of the Absurd*, which sees Pinter alongside Beckett and Ionesco as a dramatist of existential uncertainty, with Irving Wardle (1958) asserting that the play's mixture of music hall humour and creeping dread is "comedy of menace" (p. 28). More recently, Ronald Knowles (1995) and Mark Taylor-Batty (2014) have warned against using this characterisation as an interpretive key, as they both emphasize the need to focus on the specific theatrical grammar, the rhythms of interruption and repetition, through which menace is created in each individual theatre play. What they have said is also useful preparation for the present study because it indicates that the play's absurdism is not a more or less generic inheritance, uniformed throughout Pinter's early work, but one that is created by certain formal decisions, the precise nature of which can be more precisely specified in a temporal reading.

The second strand, led by Thomas Van Laan (1981) and R. A. Buck (2005) focuses on the intentional lack of information in the play. Van Laan (1981) perceives the gaps created by the play as invitations for the reader to contribute meaning, while ambiguity functions as the meaning of the play rather than as a cue for some sort of resolution (Buck, 2005, p. 178). This dispute over the handling of gaps in interpretation is a foretaste of the argument that engage with in this paper concerning the nature of silence, but neither Van

Laan nor Buck explicitly considers these gaps in terms of the withholding of time.

The third and latest strand is the power and discipline of the play. To see language as an instrument of cultural dominance, as Marc Silverstein (1993) does, is to recognize that Pinter's characters are not only clashing over information, but over meaning as well. Several critics read Foucauldian disciplinary theory directly into Ben and Gus' imprisonment and self-policing, seeing the basement as a small-scale disciplinary institution in which a lack of public visibility of surveillance is not a problem (Foucault, 1995). John Storey (2017) and Andrew Sofer (2003) interpret the food orders on the dumb waiter in terms of theories of consumption and stage property, placing the play in a wider context of how modern institutions have created a demand without consideration of the capacity of those who must satisfy the demand. Mary F. Brewer's (2009) edited volume on the play is much more detailed than any individual author study, covering the play's politics, its ethics of language and its use of space; Katherine Burkman's (1971) study of ritual in the work of Pinter adds an additional layer, considering the repetitive, unspoken gestures of the men as a stage effect that goes beyond realism.

This body of scholarship has not yet sought to treat waiting as a theoretical object in itself, rather than as a condition for the plot that other readings simply take for granted. Beyond Pinter studies, Bourdieu's (2000) description of waiting as a technique of domination (p. 228) has been elaborated and empirically developed by Javier Auyero (2012) in his research into waiting rooms in welfare offices in Argentina, where he demonstrates waiting as a means of state making compliant subjects in an ambiguous and indeterminate manner. Enforced duration is also a "body and soul experience," in the words of Harold Schweizer (2008), and the individual subjected to passivity feels that the duration is "his/her" time. This literature has never been touched by Pinter's play, though the title of his play is literally about waiting, and the entire plot revolves around it. This gap, not yet one of Absurdism and Foucault, is what the present article's aim is to address, and it is methodological as well as thematic: what is missing from the existing readings of the play's waiting is not an alternative Absurdism and Foucault but the play's waiting itself, as an object that needs to be theorized on its own terms.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of waiting is a major theme in this study, and Pierre Bourdieu (2000) explains that one of the privileges of experiencing the effects of power is waiting: an operation that, when performed by itself, by the dominated party, without any other means of expression, without any other activity, without any other object, is enough to make the dominated party feel the power. The present structural account is supplemented by two additional sources. Javier Auyero (2012) demonstrates empirically how the bureaucracy creates compliant subjects through unexplained delays, if the delay has an implied

institutional source; and Harold Schweizer (2008) characterizes phenomenologically waiting as duration that is felt as being someone else's and not one's own.

All three of these tellings provide the words with which this paper reads the play absurdist and Foucauldian ways. Esslin (2001) and Camus (1991) are still valid for their description of the refusal of resolution in the play and Foucault (1995) for explaining how the men discipline themselves, but neither of these theories explains why waiting in particular is the means of that discipline. Read with Auyero and Schweizer, Bourdieu provides that missing mechanism, while language, silence, and the dumb waiter are read in the following as the tools by which the temporal inequality is made visible on the stage.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach and close textual analysis that deals with the formal and thematic feature of *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) in the context of genre, language, silence and stage property. The published text and stage directions of the play are analyzed in detail. Once these features are identified, they are then aligned to the various accounts of the waiting that characterize the structural domination, institutional operation, and lived duration of waiting respectively, advanced by Bourdieu (2000), Auyero (2012), and Schweizer (2008), in order to explain a particular moment in the text and what existing discourse centred or discipline centred accounts inadequately explain. In this process of matching, points of similarity and difference between the temporal reading and previous absurdist and Foucauldian readings are also identified to allow the value of the present framework to be compared to, not just alongside, existing scholarship. The outcomes of this matching are then discussed section by section from genre to language to silence to play's object (the dumb waiter), to the end of the play: the theoretical vocabulary of waiting used above, not the traditional discourse or discipline vocabulary.

The Absurdist Frame: Genre and Administered Uncertainty

Ben and Gus are waiting in a space that isn't clearly defined around them, and for an event that, structurally, they don't really understand how it comes about, and this is not just a matter of exposition, but one of the play itself. The audience is told virtually nothing about the men from their actions but what their dialogue tells them, no history, no named employer, only an inference about the organisation that is calling them to serve. This withholding is frequently interpreted, in accord with Esslin (2001), as part of the play's absurdism, which is a condition in which the absurdity of life prevails. As it arrives, this uncertainty is expressed in a tone that would be more aptly described as a "comedy of menace" (Wardle, 1958, p. 28), and the discussion of the absurd, the clash between the desire for reason and the world's silences (Camus, 1991), offers a good explanation of how

Ben and Gus behave as if their situation were procedurally sensible, when it is not.

Existing scholarship has not fully isolated the play's waiting from the tramps' paradigmatic absurdist waiting, as Beckett's does. In both cases, Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for a Godot who might not ever come in *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett, 1954), and Ben and Gus are waiting as employees, who are subordinate to an organisation with its own hierarchy of commands and returns, relayed by notes, a speaking tube, or anticipation. Despite not knowing the content and duration, their waiting has an addressee, a hierarchy and a tacit time schedule. This is exactly the structure Bourdieu (2000) identifies, and exactly the difference that Auyero's (2012) institutional analysis makes clear: domination by waiting depends on the dominated party's belief that an order, an outcome, or a resolution is really coming, even from an unseen source; otherwise waiting isn't a strategy for domination, it's a strategy for confusion. Gus makes this clear in the opening of the play when he states that, "I wonder who it'll be tonight" (Pinter, 1960, p. 9) which implies someone will show up, but does not say who. But Ben and Gus do not languish in philosophical purgatory. They stand with their eyes closed, waiting as servants to see what they have to do, to rehearse the procedure, and to wait for a "boss" who will be there, but not necessarily when they want him. The absurdism of the play, then, is not indeed general but institutionally administered; it is this that makes the temporal reading that follows possible, as it moves from genre to a proper sociological account of power.

This sharpness of distinction can also be seen as why Knowles (1995) and Taylor-Batty (2014) were right to not consider "comedy of menace" a transferable fixed label. But if the play is only scarred by cosmic absurdity then it is more properly a Beckett play than any of Ionesco's, and the menace is more historically specific than the genre categories which are grafted on to Beckett wholesale: it is from an institutional texture, and a particular and recognisable one; it is from a workplace hierarchy and a reporting structure; it is from professional jargon, and so on. This also impacts on the reading of the opening minutes of the play. In fact, even before it's revealed, the audience gets two men taking up stage time and filling it with meaningless, insignificant bickering, reading newspapers, checking out football scores, arguing about the definition of the word idiom, etc., and expects this as comic book filler before the real story kicks in. But read Bourdieu (2000) and this opening isn't a filler but a demonstration: the opening is an institutional waiting that is so powerful it's filled by those waiting by micro-activities that its subjects themselves create in order to fill an officially imposed time that it cannot predict and influence. Their normal conversations with one another are already evidence of the temporal reading, though, as it waits, it is not a domination felt by Ben, but one felt by Gus.

Language and the Politics of Turn-Taking

When the play's fundamental condition is waiting, the means by which the right to end the waiting, though always available, is not equally shared between Ben and Gus, and in the case of language, the means involve a few simple words. Peter Raby (2001) sets the verbal struggles of the men in the context of Pinter's wider investigation of the ways in which the normal mode of communication reveals a power dynamic, and corrects or asserts an idiomatic preference are means of control. Domination over a certain resource, Bourdieu (2000): the turn counts, it is the speaker's, whose utterance is allowed to stand. The men's argument over the lighting of the kettle or its 'putting on' is the most clearly compressed struggle: "Put on the bloody kettle, for Christ's sake" (Pinter, 1960, p. 9). But the senior partner insists on correct usage and considers Gus' phrasing to be an error to be fixed: "Light the kettle! It is common usage!" (Pinter, 1960, p. 8). Gus presses his lips to the window briefly but the scene spirals out of control until Ben suddenly grabs him and screams, "THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!" (Pinter, 1960, p. 8), the violence lurks just beneath the surface of men's everyday speech. This is taken by Silverstein (1993) as proof of the fact that language in Pinter's plays serves as a struggle for status and not as a medium of communication. The temporal reading is one more layer: Ben's insistence on correctness is more than just about his status, it's about who can "close" a topic, and for how long can an uncertainty remain open for the two of them? In some respects grammar policing is time policing and it practices, at the sentence level, the grander structure that will one day force Ben to summon his courage to take action against his very own partner. This is not only repeated, but recreated in the men's dealings with the unseen authority over them. Ben owns and controls the newspaper, reading its violent news in a flat, unquestioning tone; Gus tries to ask questions, but they are cut short by Ben's blunt command, "Stop wondering" (Pinter, 1960, p. 9), which not only interrupts a question but the time it would take to consider one. The instructions which come through the speaking tube and hatch are communicated to Ben in exactly the same brusque, unanswerable tone as if he were a commodity in the line of succession, a scarce resource, passed from one to the other, but never belonging to any one in the room. Language is not merely a representation of the hierarchy found by other critics. It's the way time itself, and the right to not wait for an answer, gets chopped down from Wilson, and pretty much any exchange between Ben and Gus, no matter how insignificant, could be interpreted as a little negotiation about how much of that precious commodity either of the two men has got to keep at any given time. The dialogue of the play also shows a change in who is starting the small negotiations as the action goes through, when read in a cumulative manner. Early exchanges are about Gus asking, wondering, trying to open, and Ben's receptive, corrective and foreclosing. However, as the pressure on the hatch grows, Ben begins to propose instruction, not just answer questions, and becomes more and more like the tube in his tone, taking on its stiff

mannerisms. In this transformation, at the level of speech pattern alone, it's the process that Bourdieu (2000) and Auyero (2012) describe: the one who has been waiting long enough in a hierarchy, who has learned its rhythms of command, but is still subordinate to it, begins to speak in the language of the hierarchy that waited for him. By the end of the play, Ben's language is virtually the same as Wilson's, and this act of language (so much more clearly shown in the play's final movement than in any individual line of speech) looks forward to the wordless acquiescence of the play's final movement more than any other individual line of speech.

Silence and the Phenomenology of Duration

Pinter's silences are the visible traces of time that has been denied when language provides for the right to stop waiting. This article focuses on numerous critics who highlight Pinter's careful stage directions for pauses as evidence of suspicion, fear, and calculation, which no dialogue can convey, qualities that are ever present in the critic's reading of his plays. As Van Laan (1981) points out, the play's elliptical dialogue leaves spaces blank that are to be filled by the audience and/or by critics, but, Buck (2005) suggests, they are not absences waiting to be filled but instead are integral to the play's meaning. A similar thought from a differing perspective, from the mouth of another scholar, is made by Burkman (1971) in his study of the ritual in Pinter's work; he argues that the wordless, repeated action in these plays has as much dramatic weight as speech, which anticipates, though does not fully develop, the temporal function that silence plays in this reading.

These readings gesture toward a vocabulary that Schweizer (2008) provides, but doesn't quite name. A pause, on this score, is not just an interpretive space but the enactment of time as that of another, of time forced upon us, time that is not always ours to choose. When Gus says, "What's going on here? Pause" (Pinter, 1960, p. 13), it is not answered by the others, but rather by a notable pause, and the audience feels the pause is not empty but rather holds and contains the content of the question which Gus has not answered and which he does not ever go on to answer, and which does not cease to exist just because he hasn't yet, because he hasn't ever, answered it. This is the pattern every time Gus questions the job, who's giving the orders, why the victim's name is never mentioned and gets a marked pause instead of an answer; the printed silence becomes an answer and the audience is left just as Gus is waiting it out. The same structure is used in the play's last tableau, where Ben and Gus stare at each other for an unordinarily long stage direction before the curtain goes down. The wordlessness of the play is the object of the play as the audience, attuned by the play's built up wordlessness, hears it in the moment awaiting it, and not what it was hiding. Read in this way, Pinter's silences are not just a parallel communicative register other than speech, which is what the previous criticism

suggests. They're the most direct way of representing in the stage Bourdieu's (2000) assertion that domination is felt in the body, not before it is expressed in words, but before it is expressed in real measurable time in front of an audience.

At this juncture it is useful to differentiate between two kinds of silence: silence-as-absence and silence-as-instrument, as clarified by work on ritual by Burkman (1971). The gaps in the plot are the gaps in information that the audience might reasonably expect and are withheld in many of the pauses of the play: the name of the victim, the identity of the organisation, the reason for the assignment. Pause is characteristically a second type, however, in which nothing is missing; it is the passing of time without any particular event happening, as when Ben and Gus sit in the room doing little else than waiting for the next demand from above. It is the latter that is the more theoretically significant one for the argument advanced here, in that it reveals silence without the need to evoke a narrative suspense, as pure duration, but not as the absence of a narrative information that can be delayed.

The Dumb Waiter as Temporal Apparatus

Most often the mechanical dumb waiter has been interpreted as a metaphor for institutional and bureaucratic voracity and opacity. The increasingly foreign and unattainable requests for food brought about by its orders resonate, in Storey's (2017) words, with a system where the demand for food grows without it being accountable for its own fulfillment, and Sofer's (2003) examination of stage properties can account for the object's double nature as real furniture and figurative institution. Once the dumb waiter is understood, more precisely as a timekeeping device, a mechanism that imposes tempo, these readings are still valid but incomplete.

Every time the hatch is lowered it acts as an unplanned deadline. Ben and Gus have limited time and resources to respond to the limited stage time in the scene; when they fail, they must apologise using the speaking tube. What is being regulated is not just their competence but the rhythm they have to synchronize with, which is set in an entirely different place, the one assigned by the institution itself, and not by any rule; indeed, it is the rhythm of the institution itself that visitors are being made to obey. In this context, the absurdity and increasing demands of the dumb waiter are not a joke on consumer bureaucracy, but a procedure of making Ben and Gus feel the passage of institutional time as demands on the body, in real time before an audience, the theatrical equivalent of Bourdieu's (2000) statement that the experience of waiting is domination experienced physiologically without verbal proclamation.

Earlier critics have noted that the name of the title "dumb waiter" both for its serving hatch and its men, who are kept waiting without the right to question the timetable that governs them, is a device of characterisation. The puns serve multiple purposes when

read sequentially. It takes the object which determines the tempo, and the men of whom it is the role, and compresses them into one image, making explicit what the rest of the play only implies, that here to wait is the role, and waiting is not incidental to one's role, it is the role. This is completed by the unseen Wilson (addressed, but not seen). Wilson is not a character but the label for where the right to wait will actually end up being located, where as Foucault's (1995) account of dispersed and non-sovereign power, it is never given to those who wait, but rather to "the normal method to be employed" (Pinter, 1960, p. 22), which is a flat-bureaucratic phrasing of the final instruction. The orders themselves escalate, from tea to exotic dishes that man cannot produce; the conditions of compliance change just as institutions demand them to change, since the persons who have to comply lack any standing from which to protest.

It is also to be noted that the mechanical action of the dumb waiter is a stage trick in itself as it descends after different lengths of speeches, not at any fixed time within the scene. This is an irregularity that is inherent in the temporal argument: a device that could be relied upon on a known timing would allow Ben and Gus to plan around it, while a device whose timing is not known would require constant low level vigilance, which is the psychological state Bourdieu (2000) attributes to the experience of waiting on another's terms. As objects are manipulated in the play, Sofer (2003) writes, they become significant in a dramatic way: the unpredictable descent of the dumb waiter is one of the few times in the play when an inanimate object, not man, is the one dictating the tempo of the action, which briefly reverses the human centred hierarchy that is evident throughout the play.

Obedience and the Closure of Waiting

The cost of remaining silent for so long is revealed in the climactic moment of the play, when an individual finally speaks out, that is, when he or she has come to accept the deferral long enough that he or she no longer needs to think about it. But when Gus tips over the speaking tube when he is protesting against the impossible instructions, Ben responds, "Stop it! You maniac!" (Pinter, 1960, p. 21). Auyero (2012) transforms reasonable objections into perilous irrationality as do institutional waiting rooms. Years of forced and unwarranted waiting come to a head when the door opens on the man Ben and Gus had been sent to kill, and the man in question is Gus. Brewer's (2009) edited collection argues along a similar vein: that the play's true centre is not absurdist comedy, but obedience, and that the temporal structure employed here is even more general: obedience is neither just repetition of discipline as a Foucauldian account would claim, but is the outcome of a waiting that is so fully experienced that the ability to ask why has already been eroded before the order is given.

The play's refusal to closure, no confrontation with Wilson, no explanation of why Gus was chosen, no revelation of Ben's final choice, is not just an image left for audiences

to complete as Van Laan (1981) and Buck (2005) separately suggest, but rather a refusal to embrace closure, confrontation, explanation, and revelation. The play establishes a temporal pattern to its action which this scene is the logical next step in, one in which power is held by the mechanism of never ending waiting for an explanation, but only for an outcome. Quigley's (1975) contention that communicative breakdown is a structural component and not a defect of dramatic form is equally relevant here. The final, deliberate withholding of time, as the play's last stage direction allows for Gus's response to Ben to be left "deliberately" unclear, is yet another, deliberate extension of the same kind of withheld time that has allowed Ben and Gus to live their lives through this play. The presence of this powerlessness in this early play anticipates the more explicitly political uses of the "waiting room" in Pinter's later work, as noted by Peacock (1997) in his observation of the "waiting space" in that work. This administered waiting, identified above, is not incidental to this early play, but it is a recurring motif across Pinter's career, in which Pinter's interrogation rooms and detention scenarios make explicit the temporal domination that remains implicit in the earlier "basement waiting."

Finally, it is important to note that the ending doesn't state Ben's answer; this is a feature the playwright deliberately did not resolve, giving directors and audiences the freedom to do so as they please. The temporal reading, on the other hand, indicates that this rejection is necessary for the play's own purposes. If Bourdieu (2000) is right, that domination through waiting requires the withholder to never be made to explain himself, then a play in which Wilson's domination might finally justify his demands (a play in which Ben's final choice is resolved, either toward compliance or refusal) would need to undo the mechanism that the play has been the length of drawing out. The silence at the end of the play is not therefore a lack of guts on Pinter's part, but the only one that is appropriate to the argument the play has been putting forward about power since its beginning.

Conclusion

The Dumb Waiter (1960) portrays power not as a linguistic or disciplinary construct (both of which have been well documented in the work of Pinter scholars) but as a temporal one: power that is won and consumed by an unequal allocation of time itself. The reading proposed by Bourdieu (2000) as "waiting," extended by Auyero's (2012) description of "bureaucratic," and Schweizer's (2008) analysis of "duration" reframes the absurdist form of the play as the administration of uncertainty; verbal battles as a contest of ending the wait rather than a contest about status; silences as the visible traces of stolen time rather than simply an alternative communicative register; and the main prop as one that imposes the tempo rather than that it just makes an arbitrary demand. On this reading, the puzzle that is the end of the play is not a question to be answered, but precisely the one

that is supposed to have been yielded to by the forced delay itself: an audience that has to accept the ending because the ability to ask why has been exhausted by the delay.

This reading does not dismiss the absurdist and Foucauldian scholarship it engages with; rather, it questions the mechanism those approaches describe without naming it directly. It also proposes that the sociology of waiting, originally invented outside the sphere of the study of literature, holds explanatory power when applied to the dramatic text constructed around enforced duration and that Pinter's early work provides a particularly rich field for testing this proposition. Future research could extend this temporal lens comparatively, exploring the difference between Pinter's 'waiting' and Beckett's 'waiting' in the broader context of the Theatre of the Absurd, or the sociology of waiting in Pinter's later, more explicitly political interrogations and detentions, where the deprivation of time for the powerless becomes even more overtly a weapon of the state. Another would examine the relationship between Pinter's basement and other bureaucratic delay dramatisations of the twentieth century; whether administered waiting is a regular, though under-investigated, dramaturgical approach within the period, or just an element of this one play.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Biographical Note (1st Author)

Dr. Muhd. Mustafizur Rahman is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Bangladesh Army University of Engineering & Technology (BAUET), Qadirabad Cantonment, Natore-6431, Bangladesh. He completed his BA (Honours), MA in English, and PhD from Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh. His research interests include English literature, postcolonial studies, and literary criticism. He has published many research articles in reputed journals and is actively engaged in teaching, and research.

Biographical Note (2nd Author)

Mostak Hossain is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Bangladesh Army University of Engineering & Technology (BAUET), Qadirabad Cantonment, Natore, Bangladesh. He completed his BA (Honours) and MA in English Literature from Islamic University, Kushtia. His research interests include English literature, postcolonial studies, literary criticism, and medical humanities. He has published many articles in reputed international journals and is currently pursuing a PhD at Khulna University, Bangladesh.

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