

“The Dumb Waiter” as a Transcendental Signified—a Deconstructive Approach to Harold Pinter’s Major Motif in the Play *The Dumb Waiter*

Abstract

Harold Pinter’s play *The Dumb Waiter* is commonly known as a comedy of menace. It stands out as a play that intricately balances speech and action while simultaneously it sustains a continual tension between elements of language, non-language and action. These dramatic elements—pauses, repetitions, silent moments, delayed action, body language, speeches, and sound effects—enable the playwright to create a powerful sense of tension, menace and violence. Even the agents of non-language, i.e. pauses, relapses into silence, transmit particles of meaning while at the same time they undermine and subvert their own function in the course of action. The major symbol in the play, “the dumb waiter,” appears as a device which repetitively moves “upstairs” and “downstairs” and increases the sense of violence and intimidation. Furthermore, the meaning-formation and meaning-subversion in the play owes much to the employment of this motif because the constant clatter of the “dumb waiter” moving up and down both reinforces and effaces the anthropomorphic presence it is supposed to stand for. While in the beginning of the play it serves as a sort of a phonetic/linguistic signifier, it gradually begins to disseminate into an ambiguous, amorphous and evasive presence, a “transcendental signified.” In deconstructionist terms, it is a play of signification which disrupts semantic and linguistic delineations as it imposes itself through epitomes of absence and presence, language and non-language, meaning and non-meaning. The dumb waiter becomes the inaccessible realm of the lost origin, of the “logos.”

Key Words: Pinter, *Dumb Waiter*, Derrida, Deconstructionism, Transcendental Signified, Logos.