

Antagonism or Alliance: Freud's Joke Structure in Pinter's Early Plays

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ABSTRACT

Freud's theory of jokes provides a new perspective for the interpretation of Harold Pinter's early comedies. Pinter's characters are often in a triangle, a relationship that can easily lead to an ever-changing alliance of two, while the third individual is isolated. Through the interpretation of the joke structure of Pinter's early plays, it is not difficult to find that the triangular relationship between characters presents the ever-changing themes of domination, control, exploitation, conquest and victimization in the development of the drama, and reveals the alliances and antagonisms hidden under the surface of the dialogue between characters.

Keywords: Antagonism, Alliance, Pinter's plays, Freud, Joke structure.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1961, Martin Esslin published *The Theatre of the Absurd*, which listed Harold Pinter for the first time as one of the British absurd playwrights. [1] The characters in his works are mostly the unemployed, petty employees and other working-class people, and he is good at revealing the foreboding of everyday life and the tumult under calmness. He pointed out that the metaphysical suffering caused by the absurdity of the human condition was one of the major themes of the theatre of the absurd. Pinter's early plays fit the characteristics of the theatre of the absurd, in which he restored the most basic elements: an enclosed space and an unpredictable dialogue. The contents of his plays are reduced to a series of simple definitions rather than being appreciated as a rich and complex text. [2] The events involved are illogical or unmotivated, and characters' actions are inexplicable. The absurdity of language implies the absurdity of the human condition and the fear of menace may suggest a universal human trauma in the universe. [3]

Pinter wrote four early works: *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Dumb Waiter* (1957) and *A Slight Ache* (1958). They contain a common theme: people are constantly threatened by external threats in this world. This threat lurks outside the house, from someone or some force

outside. The author does not explicitly describe the mysterious person or the mysterious force in the play, but the reader can always feel the mystery, the threat, and the terror. For example, Rose, the heroine in *The Room*, is afraid of the new resident she has never met who has moved into the basement; Stanley, the tenant in *The Birthday Party*, is afraid of the two unexpected visitors; in *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus fears an external dominant force that he wants to know about but doesn't understand; The hero of *A Slight Ache* is afraid of the man who inexplicably stands in front of his house all day selling matches.

2. FREUD'S JOKE STRUCTURE

Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, published in 1905, is an in-depth study of humor techniques, purposes, motivations, psychological causes, and its relation to dreams and the unconscious mind.[4] Freud gave a comprehensive analysis of humor in the book that the characteristics of humor can be inferred based on the purpose of humor and the different reactions of the listener. Sometimes humor is humor for humor's sake, humor is an end in itself, and is called as "pure" jokes, such as puns and clever ideas. If humor is not an end in itself, that is, if it is not pure humor, but is tendentious, it becomes tendentious humor, then it serves only two ends, either hostile humor or obscene humor. He is more

concerned with tendentious jokes, which provide insight into the unconscious of both the teller and the amused person.

In general, a “tendentious” purposeful piece of humor requires the presence of three people: in addition to the joke maker, a second person must be the object of hostility or sexual assault, and a third person, whom the humor is intended to give pleasure. It is worth noting that the psychological process of humor is done between the first person (self) and the third person (external person), so the purpose of joke makers is not to create humor for their own pleasure, but to establish social relations with others.

In this way, the process of generating a joke distinguishes three positions: the attacker, the victim, and the audience. And the act of making humor forces everyone who hears it to become involved, to become part of the whole structure of a joke, to hear it is seen as participation, to take a stand. The third party of the joke structure, the audience, is forced to make a choice in the conflict between the joke maker and the victim.

3. FREUD’S JOKE STRUCTURE IN PINTER’S EARLY PLAYS

Freud’s joke structure provides a new perspective for the interpretation of Harold Pinter’s early plays. There are typically three characters often in a triangular relationship that presents the changing themes of domination, control, exploitation, conquest and victimization during the development of the plot, which are exactly the models of a power structure. The tendentious humor in Freud’s theory is also the model of power structure, which is the embodiment of domination and conquest. Therefore, as reflected in Pinter’s plays, humor reveals the alliance and opposition hidden under the surface of the characters’ dialogue, which is a miniature political expression of the characters’ contradictions and dramatic conflicts.

3.1 Freud’s Joke Structure in *The Dumb Waiter*

In *The Dumb Waiter*, [5] Gus and Ben are killers who wait in the elevator for their intended victims to appear. Ben, who passed the time by reading the newspaper, told Gus a story about an eighty-seven-year-old man crossing the street who had crawled under a truck. Ben read the story to Gus and, like a joke-maker in Freud’s theory, he wanted a reaction from Gus as to whether Gus

would be in his shoes and agree that the old man was utterly stupid and ridiculous. Thus, Freud’s joke structure is constructed: Ben becomes a joke maker by telling stories; the eighty-seven-year-old is the object and the victim of the joke; Gus is the third person, the audience.

In Freud’s joke structure, the purpose of the joke maker is to generate a joke in order to establish a relationship with others, so the building of a common alliance between the joke maker and the audience becomes the focus of the narrative: “we” should laugh at “them”. Ben, the joke teller, tells this joke about the old man, with the subtext “he’s so stupid and he deserves it”, in order to bond with Gus, and Gus’s reaction should be to laugh at the old man with Ben, because only together their laughing at the victim of the joke can prove that Gus and Ben form an alliance, and that Gus has the basic qualities to be a professional killer. Because a professional killer should not be sympathized with, let alone questioned, the victim. Their superior must have a good and unquestionable reason for choosing whom to be the victim. But Gus’s response to the joke was that “Who advised him to do that?” His subtext was that someone had advised the old man to do so, and thus he put the blame on the imaginary proponent, a terrible master messenger hidden behind the joke, rather than on the old man himself. This question leads to a further interpretation of the joke: maybe the old man does not deserve to die. Instead, he is only a victim, and we should sympathize with him. In doing so, Gus finds himself on the opposite side of the joke teller Ben and in an alliance with the victim. In other words, Gus doesn’t show the quality he should have as a professional killer from the beginning, and Ben and Gus’s eventual separation is actually foreshadowed in this first joke structure, which sets the tone for Gus to eventually become the target victim.

Pinter repeated this joke structure later in the play, in which Ben tells a story in a newspaper about a girl who kills a cat. This time, Gus can’t even agree with Ben’s worldview: he grills Ben over and over and questions the story: How did she do it? Why doesn’t it mention in the paper? Furthermore, Gus even considers the girl innocent and presumes that it is her brother that makes her. As a result, Gus refuses to laugh with Ben and, at the same time, refuses to stand for unity with Ben.

During the rest of the waiting time, Gus complains, and the conflict with Ben gradually increases: Gus thinks that the toilet tank is broken

and the toilet won't flush, while Ben says that there is nothing wrong, it is just a broken float; Gus continues to complain that the bed is not very good, that there are no blankets, the sheets are not clean, and it smells, while Ben questions him "how do you know it's not clean?"; Gus says that the environment of the place is too bad, like a garbage dump, and there are no windows, one must get rheumatic disease staying in this place for a long time, but Ben criticized Gus for nagging and complaining. Standing on the opposite side of Ben, Gus constantly challenges the authority, and finally, at the end of the play, Gus pays the price for his unwise choices, and Ben's aggressiveness as the joke maker of Freud's joke structure is shown in the next stage action: Ben turns around, points his gun at the door, and Gus stumbles in. Ben produces humor, acts verbal violence, and performs physical violence at the same time. As Christopher once pointed out, "Laughter is a serious business, and comedy is a more dangerous weapon than tragedy."^[6] Here, the weapon nature of comedy is reflected in the scene: a link is established between the verbal violence of the joke maker and his potential physical violence, which makes the end of the play not too surprising. Therefore, from Freud's joke structure, Pinter tries to make us realize that it is meaningless to pay attention only to the content of humor, and what's important is the structure, alliance and confrontation revealed by the humor.

3.2 Freud's Joke Structure in *A Slight Ache*

Apart from *The Dumb Waiter*, Pinter's other early plays follow a similar pattern. For example, *A Slight Ache*[7], originally a radio play written by Pinter for the BBC in 1958, also shows the role of Freud's joke structure, which helps the audience to interpret the theme of the play from a micro perspective. At the beginning of the play, Edward and his wife Flora are having breakfast at the dinner table when they spot a wasp buzzing nearby and have an exchange discussing how to get rid of the wasp.

Freud's joke theory is at work again, where Edward's intention to chase the wasp away ends up trapping it in the jam. And his apparent bravado, as if he has the situation under control, has the opposite effect. Then Edward discovers another intrusive presence: the old man standing at their back door. Edward threatened again, but at last he invited the old match-seller into his study for a chat. Again, Edward becomes the isolated party in the

joke structure: at the end of the play, the old match-seller is invited to Flora's house, while Edward himself is banished.

A Slight Ache and *The Dumb Waiter* both end with one character being isolated. From a dramatic point of view, the reversals of the power of the characters in both endings are astonishing: power structures suddenly shift, and the people who were at the top of the power pyramid are suddenly stripped of their status, reduced to nobodies and even homeless. Pinter removes layers of the veil of the characters in the play, and when Freud's joke structure is revealed, such seemingly micro and interesting conflicts become disturbing and even frightening when they are infinitely amplified and examined. [8] What was once a comedy has become a menace, but in fact, their essence is exactly the same.

3.3 The Dynamic Alliance in the Joke Structure

The key to appreciating Pinter's plays is not only the surprise of the isolation of the characters, but also the dynamic alliance in this triangle. In Pinter's works, the alliance is perhaps even more astonishing than the isolation. In *A Slight Ache*, Flora is supposed to side with her husband, but ends up siding with the old match-seller; In *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus forms an alliance with a third party who never appears, the victim the killers have been waiting for; The final scene in Pinter's first play, *The Room*, also dramatically presents an unlikely alliance: Rose and the blind black Riley form an alliance. Throughout the play, Rose worries about threats from the outside world. When blind Riley shows up, they have an inexplicable conversation: Rose claims not to know Riley, calling him a "weirdo" and "lunatic", while Riley learns about her past like an old friend. Rose's husband, Bert, came home, kicked Riley unconscious and walked away, while Rose stood there, covering his eyes and repeating, "Can't see. I can't see, I can't see." By declaring herself invisible, Rose shows that she is on the same side as the blind Riley, and is therefore somehow connected to the unknown and frightening. Such an alliance struck us speechless, as Rose's alliance with blind Riley seemed closer, while her barbarian husband simply "walked away". While *The Room* contains a lot of humorous, comical dialogue, the final scene gives us less humor than the raw, aggressive impulses that lie behind it. Burt attacks Riley, but there's no "laughter" here, because Rose

doesn't show any pleasure or joy in this attack, even though she's expected to be. Instead, through her actions, she aligns herself with the victim, Riley.

4. CONCLUSION

In Pinter's plays, the three types of people who appear most frequently in the play, the abuser, the abused, and the bystander, the roles of which will be finally reversed depending on the plot, but in their very essence, they all represent abnormal abnormalities and individuals alienated by the power environment of modern society. Within the joke structure, all of the surprising isolation and alliance does not give us answers, but leaves the audience even more confused. Because "the inability to empathize, our experience of theater is fragmented. However, we could not be more aware of the human predicament depicted".[9] As a result, Pinter is more concerned with the fact of the characters' alliances themselves, and he seems to prefer that we confront these unknowns, that we as viewers don't just speculate about the characters' positions from our limited understanding of who they will isolate and who they will align themselves with, instead arguing that the depth of humanity is only revealed in moments of crisis in comedy. In drama, the truth is always vague, you can never really find it, but the search goes on, and it is the search that triggers all the efforts of the writer. Searching is a task, and one often encounter the truth in the dark, bump into it, or simply see an image or shape that matches the truth, but unfortunately you are often unaware of it. But the radical truth is that you never find a single truth in the dramatic arts, but multiple truths. They challenge each other, shape each other, reflect each other and ignore each other, attract each other and blind each other. Sometimes you feel like you have the truth in your grasp, but then it slips through your fingers and disappears. But the search for truth can never be stopped, and it cannot be put off. As audiences, we must face it, right there, right on the spot.

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