The Dumb Waiter

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HAROLD PINTER

Harold Pinter was born in 1930 to British Jewish parents and raised in London's East End, a working-class neighborhood. He attended the Hackney Downs School as a child and later studied acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art until 1948, ending his studies after only two terms to tour with various repertory companies throughout the 1950s. Pinter's first play, *The Room*, was first produced in 1957. This was followed by *The Dumb Waiter*, which premiered in 1960. *The Birthday Party*, his first full-length play, was first produced in 1958; however, the play's absurd characteristics were not well received by audiences, and so its run lasted just one week. Pinter's breakthrough came with his second full-length play, *The Caretaker*, which was first produced in 1960 and earned him his association with the Theatre of the Absurd, a designation that refers to the then-popular absurdist plays written mainly by European and American playwrights in the late 1950s. Taking inspiration from the ideas of Existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, absurdist theater uses ambiguous plot, sparce dramatic action, and repetitive, nonsensical dialogue to portray the world as absurd and purposeless, and the human condition as characterized by futility, hopelessness, and anxiety—elements that figure prominently in Pinter's plays. Other notable characteristics of Pinter's plays are a menacing atmosphere, long pauses, and nonsensical, repetitive dialogue. In addition to his works for the stage, he wrote screenplays, radio plays, and TV dramas, though he remains best known for his early plays. Pinter received many awards throughout his career, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005. He died of cancer on December 24, 2008.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By the year of *The Dumb Waiter*'s first performance (1960), the Cold War had been underway for over a decade. The Cold War refers to a period of tension between the United States, the Soviet Union, and their allies, as the two superpowers struggled to achieve global influence. Between 1947 and 1991, when the dissolution of the Soviet Union marked the effective end of the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union battled for global influence not through live combat but through indirect means like espionage, the nuclear arms race, psychological warfare, propaganda, and the Space Race. The nuclear arms race, in particular, made the looming threat of nuclear annihilation a perpetual fear. Though not a main player in the Cold War, Great Britain (which was allied with the U.S.) contributed to anti-Soviet espionage efforts and was involved in early stages of the arms race. But the threat of violence and annihilation that dominated this period ultimately remained invisible and unrealized—the arms race did not lead to nuclear annihilation. In this way, the menacing atmosphere that characterized life during the Cold War resembles the ominous tone of *The Dumb Waiter*, in which the threat of danger becomes more fearsome and powerful than danger itself.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Pinter's plays are associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, a designation for the then-popular absurdist plays written primarily by European and American playwrights in the 1950s. Eugène Ionesco was a Romanian-French playwright associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* is about citizens of a small French town who turn into rhinoceroses. Only the central character, Bérenger, stays human—and he is then ridiculed for his fixation with the rhinoceroses. Much like *The Dumb Waiter*, which uses absurdist elements to examine more serious issues like class anxiety, critics have interpreted *Rhinoceros* as a critical response to the rise of Fascism and Nazism in the years preceding World War II. *The Dumb Waiter* takes obvious inspiration from Irish playwright Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Like *The Dumb Waiter*, *Waiting for Godot* tells the stories of two characters (Vladimir and Estragon) who spend the entirety of the play waiting for a man named Godot, though neither is certain that they've met Godot or if Godot will show up at all. As with many of Pinter's plays, the plot of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is sparse, ambiguous and open to interpretation. Other plays of Pinter's similar to *The Dumb Waiter* include *The Caretaker*, which tells the story of two brothers, Mick and Aston, whose lives are upended when a rude, opportunistic drifter named Davies overstays his welcome at their flat and tries to turn the brothers against each other. Like *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Caretaker* centers around themes of failed communication and power imbalances.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Dumb Waiter
- **When Written:** 1957
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1960 (first performance)
- **Literary Period:** Post-War
- **Genre:** Absurdist Theater, Comedic Drama
- **Setting:** A basement room in Birmingham
- **Climax:** Gus enters the room through the right door, revealing himself to be the target, and Ben pulls his revolver

on Gus.

- **Antagonist:** Wilson; authority in general

EXTRA CREDIT

Absurd is the Word. The adjective "Pinteresque" has been coined to describe elements characteristic of Pinter's plays, such as a threatening atmosphere, minimalist plot, colloquial and repetitive language, and long pauses. Still, when asked in an interview to define what it means to be Pinteresque, Pinter claimed not to know what the term meant.

Passé Pauses. Pinter's works are known for their use of silence and long pauses, yet in the 2007 documentary *Working With Pinter*, Pinter suggests that people read too far into his play's silences and pauses—that he intended them to be simple stage directions, not the deeply symbolic gestures people have made them out to be. He even admits to cutting half the pauses when he acts in his own plays—and he encourages actors and directors to do the same, if they see it fit to do so.

PLOT SUMMARY

Hitmen Ben and Gus wait in a dreary, windowless basement room in Birmingham for their target to arrive. The room contains two beds positioned against the back wall; between the beds, built into the wall, is a closed serving hatch. There's a door leading to a lavatory and small kitchenette on the left side of the room and a door leading to a passage on the right side of the room.

Ben sits on the left-hand bed and reads a **newspaper**. He looks up from his paper to watch Gus, who is seated on the right-hand bed and struggling to tie his shoelaces. Gus gets up, walks to the door, and pulls a flattened matchbox and a flattened packet of his cigarettes out of his shoes. Then he leaves the room to use the lavatory, which won't flush and seems to be broken. Ben glares at Gus as Gus leaves the room. When Gus returns, Ben describes the violent, upsetting stories he reads in the paper. Both men respond to the stories with disgust.

Ben orders Gus to make them some tea, but Gus says he can't because he doesn't have any **matches**. Not long after, someone slides an unmarked envelope containing 12 matches under the right door. Ben makes Gus open the door to see who left them, but when Gus opens the door, nobody is there. Then, Ben orders Gus to go "light the kettle" to make tea. Ben's words confuse Gus, who insists that he wouldn't be lighting the kettle—he'd be lighting the gas. Ben snaps that "light the kettle" is a common saying. They bicker about this and about other banal subjects, such as football. Gus eventually goes to the kitchenette to prepare tea, only to discover that they have no money to feed the stove's gas meter.

Gus—Ben's subordinate and the chattier of the two men—complains about how run-down the room is; he thinks that their boss, Wilson, mistreats and underpays them. Gus hounds Ben with questions about their present assignment, like who tonight's hit will be, but Ben refuses to answer him; instead, he scolds Gus for asking so many questions and complaining about their job. Ben says that Gus has no right to complain, since they usually only work once per week. He accuses Gus of being a slacker, noting that Gus hasn't even bothered to polish his **revolver**.

Gus and Ben sit silently on their respective beds for a time. Gus tries to talk to Ben about an earlier hit they carried out on a woman. He fixates on what a "mess" the attack was and wonders if anybody cleans up after them once they finish a job. Ben assures Gus that someone does—their organization has "departments for everything."

Suddenly, they hear a loud noise coming from the wall behind their beds and discover a hidden **dumb waiter** behind the serving-hatch. There's a box on top of the dumb waiter. Gus reaches inside and pulls out a piece of paper with a meal order written on it. Ben explains that the order was sent down from the café upstairs. Gus claims that there can't be a café upstairs, since the basement kitchenette is too small and ill-equipped to fill café orders. Ben grows increasingly agitated at Gus for being disagreeable. As they argue, the dumb waiter carries the empty box back upstairs. The dumb waiter continues to send orders to Ben and Gus, each more complicated than the last, but they lack the ingredients and equipment necessary to fill the orders. Still, Ben insists that they have to send something up, so they put some snacks that Gus brought along in the box. Gus shouts into the hatch to announce the items they're sending up. This angers Ben, who tells him that's not how they're supposed to do things.

Ben orders Gus to get dressed—they'll be called to carry out the hit shortly. Gus asks Ben when Wilson will get in touch with them. Agitated, Ben orders Gus to be patient. After the dumb waiter delivers an order for a Chinese dish, Ben says they need to tell the people upstairs that they can't fill any of the orders. They find a speaking-tube next to the dumb waiter. Gus whistles into it to alert the people upstairs that he wants to speak and then shouts into the tube that they don't have anything; he gets no response. Ben picks up the tube and, in an apologetic tone, explains the situation. The people on the other end of the line respond to Ben, but Gus (and the audience) can't hear what they're saying. Ben explains to Gus that all the food they sent up was bad or stale.

Ben talks and listens some more, and then he hangs up the speaking-tube and excitedly tells Gus that it's time to "light the kettle." Gus is confused, since he's already explained they have no gas. But Ben tells Gus that they need to prepare for their assignment. Ben lists off orders for how the hit will go down, and Gus dutifully recites the instructions back to Ben. Gus will wait behind the right door, where their target can't see him.

When their target arrives, Ben will take out his gun, and the target will freeze. Then he'll turn around and see Gus. Gus points out that Ben forgot to mention Gus's gun—and he's never forgotten this step before. Ben frowns. After a beat, he corrects himself and says that Gus will have his gun, too. Gus asks if the plan will change if their target is a girl, but Ben says it won't.

Gus leaves to use the lavatory. When he returns, he appears troubled. He asks Ben why Wilson would leave them matches but no gas. Then he asks who's upstairs. This angers Ben, and he strikes Gus. But Gus thinks their higherups are playing games with them. The dumb waiter delivers an order for Scampi, and Gus angrily shouts into the speaking-tube that they don't have any food. Ben grabs the tube from Gus and tells him he can't do that. He calls Gus a "maniac." Ben returns to his bed and picks up his newspaper, and he and Gus go through the same dialogue they delivered at the start of the play.

Gus gets up to grab a glass of water. While he's gone, the speaking-tube's whistle sounds. Ben picks up the tube, listens, and says that they're "ready." He calls out to Gus that it's time. The right door opens, and Ben points his revolver toward the door—but it's Gus who walks inside. His uniform and revolver have been taken from him. Ben and Gus stare at each other as Ben keeps his revolver aimed toward Gus.

CHARACTERS

Ben – Ben is a hitman and one of the play's two central characters. He's quiet, professional, and single-mindedly focused on carrying out his and Gus's assigned hit according to instructions from their boss, Wilson. Ben, unlike Gus, obeys authority without question. He's also less burdened by class anxiety than Gus. As working-class hitmen, Ben and Gus are at the bottom of the social hierarchy and at the mercy of their wealthier, more powerful higherups. But whereas Gus grumbles about being mistreated and underpaid, condemning Wilson for failing to communicate with them, Ben accepts his inferior position and the disadvantages that come with it. Ben's respect for power hierarchies and the status quo comes through in the demeaning way he treats Gus, his subordinate partner. Ben repeatedly cuts Gus off and prohibits Gus from asking questions about their assignment. He becomes agitated and aggressive when Gus challenges his authority, slamming his **newspaper** onto his bed to threaten violence. Though Ben insists that he's only looking out for Gus, Ben clearly benefits from his and Gus's power imbalance. For instance, only Ben can use the speaking-tube to communicate with the people upstairs. And at the end of the play, it's Ben who receives the order to carry out a hit on Gus, who has apparently been their target the entire time, though the play leaves it ambiguous whether Ben has known this all along. If he has known, this shows just how low Ben is willing to stoop to remain in the good graces of his higherups and maintain what little power an oppressive system affords him.

Gus – Gus is a hitman and one of the play's two central characters. He's more vocal and curious than Ben, his superior. Whereas Ben never challenges authority, Gus has lots of questions about the specifics of their mission. He also repeatedly tries to get Ben to talk about their past hits, like one that involved a woman and was apparently quite gory. Gus's fixation on the violence of this earlier hit suggests that he takes issue with—or is at least interested in examining—the moral ramifications of his and Ben's profession and their obedience to authority. Gus, unlike Ben, takes issue with how their working-class status invites exploitation and poor treatment from authority figures. Gus spends a lot of time grumbling about how lacking the room they've been assigned to wait in is and about their boss, Wilson's, regular failure to be upfront with them about their assignments. He also speculates that the people using the **dumb waiter** to send down food orders from the café upstairs don't actually want the food and are merely putting in orders to mess with them. Gus's lower status also means he's not permitted to speak directly with their higherups and so must rely on Ben for information. Meanwhile, Ben mistreats and talks down to Gus throughout the play, refusing to answer Gus's questions and keeping him in check with the threat of violence. The play ends with Gus walking through the right door—the door they've been told the target will walk through—and so revealing himself to be the target of that night's hit. Ben points his **revolver** at Gus as both men stare at each other silently. Gus's betrayal and probable demise illustrates the dangers inherent in challenging authority in a society that rewards conformity and punishes individuality.

Wilson – Wilson is Ben and Gus's boss in the unnamed organized crime circuit that employs them. They refer to him in conversation, but he never appears onstage. Gus talks about wanting to talk to Wilson and ask him questions about the jobs Wilson assigns them, but he doesn't quite know how, suggesting that Wilson and Gus's class differences (Gus is working class, while Wilson is presumably wealthier or more powerful) create a distance between them that makes it difficult to relate to and understand each other.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CLASS ANXIETY AND POWER

The Dumb Waiter follows two hitmen, Ben and Gus, as they wait in a windowless basement room for their target to arrive. From the start, the play's dismal setting makes it clear that Ben and Gus's status as low-level criminals places them on a lower rung of the social hierarchy than the people they work for—and this low social position leaves them vulnerable to suffering, mistreatment, and exploitation. Their boss, an unseen man named Wilson, displays a blatant disregard for Ben and Gus's comfort and wellbeing. For instance, he provides them **matches** and a stove to make tea with—but no money for the gas required to run the stove's meter. Ben and Gus's communication with their higher-ups is infrequent and convoluted, and they (or at least Gus, Ben's subordinate) spend much of the play in the dark about what that night's job will require them to do.

Meanwhile, Ben and Gus have vastly different approaches to dealing with class issues. Ben resents his lower-class status but accepts the concept of hierarchy. He tries to appear put-together, speaks deferentially to authority figures, and respects social norms. For instance, he scolds Gus for shouting up the **dumb waiter** hatch, explaining that "It isn't done," meaning the people upstairs—presumably people of a higher class—will consider Gus's lack of decorum low-class and judge him (and Ben) for it. Gus, on the other hand, has none of Ben's anxieties about his lower-class status. He rails against the more affluent, powerful people that exploit and mistreat him. Unlike Ben, Gus makes no effort to disguise his working-class background with a polished appearance or a working knowledge of decorum: he doesn't polish his gun, and he speaks loudly, rudely, and colloquially. When Ben, through the speaking-tube, learns that Wilson wants them to make him a cup of tea, Gus angrily demands, "What about us?" In other words, why should Wilson's higher status entitle him to the comfort and sustenance he repeatedly denies Ben and Gus? In the end, though, when it's revealed that Gus is in fact the target they've been waiting for, the play illustrates the troubling ways in which exploitative working conditions and hierarchies can pit workers against each other, incentivizing working-class people to betray their peers in the hopes of gaining power themselves—though it's unclear in the play whether Ben's unquestioning obedience will even improve his circumstances at all.

ABSURDISM AND MEANINGLESSNESS

The Dumb Waiter, first performed in 1960, contains elements of absurdist theater. Absurdism is a genre of fiction in which characters experience situations that call into question the fundamental meaning of life and point to the ultimate futility of the human condition. Works of absurdist fiction typically focus on the existential anxiety characters experience as a result of these experiences. Characters often must perform purposeless, repetitive tasks that demonstrate their lives' meaninglessness. *The Dumb Waiter*, for instance, tells the story of two hitmen, Ben and Gus. Yet the audience never sees the men carry out their hit. Instead, the men spend the entirety of the play staring into space or bickering with each other as they wait for a call from their boss telling them it's time to perform that night's hit. Absurdist works frequently lack a conventional plot and a clear, decisive moral. *The Dumb Waiter*, for instance, concludes with the revelation that Gus is in fact the target of his and Ben's hit, and the play ends with Ben pointing his **revolver** at Gus as the men stare silently at each other. Yet it remains unclear how and why Ben arrives at the decision to betray his partner—or even if he carries out the hit on Gus at all. Ben's motivations and behavior remain vague, mysterious, and frustratingly open to interpretation—and all this makes it practically impossible for the audience to pass judgment on him.

In addition, *The Dumb Waiter*, like many works of absurdist theater, employs nonsensical language to show how life's meaninglessness is rooted in and perpetuated by breakdowns in human communication. For instance, Ben and Gus spar over their different takes on a common idiomatic expression. When Ben orders Gus to "light the kettle" so they can make tea, Gus claims not to understand Ben before insisting that what Ben really meant to say was "put on the kettle." Gus also repeatedly asks his superior, Ben, questions about that night's job that Ben can't (or refuses to) understand. Often, Ben ignores Gus's questions—and when he does answer them, his vague, convoluted answers only heighten Gus's confusion and add to the tension and anxiety that gradually develops between the two men over the course of the play. In short, *The Dumb Waiter* draws on numerous elements of absurdist fiction to suggest the fundamental meaninglessness of life and the futility of the human condition.

OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

The Dumb Waiter tells the story of Ben and Gus, hired assassins who spend the entirety of the play awaiting word from their superior (Wilson) that it's time to carry out that night's hit. Throughout the play, the men receive coded, often incomprehensible instructions from their higher-ups about the hit. For instance, they receive an unmarked envelope from an unseen, unknown source containing 12 **matches**—and no accompanying note of explanation. Midway through the play, the men discover a **dumb waiter** (a small, elevator-like platform primarily used to carry items, usually food, between different floors of a building) in the wall of the room. The dumb waiter delivers notes to the men requesting increasingly specific, complex food orders for patrons of a café located in an upper floor of the building. It's never made clear—to Gus and Ben, or to the audience—whether these orders are coded messages from the men's superiors or merely unrelated food orders sent from the

unsuspecting owners of the café.

The opaque, convoluted nature of these instructions makes it unclear what, exactly, is required of the men and why they're being asked to carry out the hit. More importantly, it raises questions about why Gus and Ben continue to obey authority when they neither understand nor condone what's asked of them. While Gus repeatedly attempts to ask Ben, the more experienced hitman and Gus's superior, questions about their hit that night, Ben shoots down his questions, sternly advising Gus that it's in his best interest to be quiet and just do as he's told. Meanwhile, Ben remains quiet, professional, and singlehandedly focused on the task at hand for the entirety of the play, even though he shows scattered signs that he, like Gus, has reservations about the moral dubiousness of their job. (When Gus tries to discuss a previous night's hit that required them to kill a woman, for instance, Ben squeezes his eyes shut, literally and figuratively illustrating how much discomfort he feels at confronting the atrocities his job requires him to commit.) All this comes to a head when Ben, following instructions conveyed to him through a speaking-tube that hangs from the room's wall, points his **revolver** at Gus, who is revealed to be that night's target. The play ends on an uncertain note, with the men staring at each other in shock and horror as Ben nevertheless prepares to shoot. The play's ambiguous, troubling ending suggests that it's often easier to obey authority than to think for oneself—and that the pressure to obey authority leads people to commit acts of violence and injustice, even when they have reservations about doing so.

CONFORMITY VS. INDIVIDUALITY

As hitmen Ben and Gus sit waiting in a windowless, sparsely decorated basement room for the arrival of their target, Ben passes the time by reading a newspaper. He describes the stories he reads to Gus. One story is about an old man who, unable to find a way to walk across a traffic-congested street, decides to take an unconventional risk: he crawls underneath a lorry (a truck) in an attempt to pass underneath the traffic rather than through it. The man's innovative plan backfires, though, when traffic starts to move and the lorry runs him over. In this way, the man's innovative thinking becomes the death of him, and the news story functions as a cautionary tale about the dangers of thinking outside the box. Ben and Gus's actions throughout the play reinforce the dangers of individuality and the safety of conformity. Ben, Gus's superior, is unrelentingly obedient to his and Gus's higher-ups and single-mindedly committed to completing their mission, even if it doesn't make sense to him. Though Gus tends to ask questions about their mission and express his discomfort with the atrocities his and Ben's line of work forces them to commit, his attempts to rail against authority and act of his own volition are repeatedly beaten down by Ben, who physically strikes Gus whenever he challenges Ben's authority or asks too many questions. And Gus nevertheless takes comfort in the ease of following instructions rather than having to make decisions for himself, something that's made clear in a scene where Ben lists off instructions about how their hit will go down that night, and Gus dutifully repeats the instructions back to Ben verbatim—as though it's second nature for him to do so. *The Dumb Waiter* examines the ways that Ben and Gus's world—and in a broader sense, society at large—uses the threat of violence to encourage conformity, suppress individuality, and maintain the status quo.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE DUMB WAITER

The dumb waiter represents power imbalances and the power of authority. A dumbwaiter is a small, elevator-like platform used to carry items (usually food or prepared dishes) between the different levels of a building. In early-20th-century London, they were common fixtures in the houses of the privileged; domestic servants would use them to move laundry between different rooms of the house. By virtue of its historical use alone, the dumbwaiter functions as a symbol of class disparity: the way a dumbwaiter *physically* distances the lower classes from the upper classes they serve illustrates the way that Ben and Gus's and Wilson's different socioeconomic statuses create a power imbalance between them. As working-class men, Ben and Gus are at the mercy of Wilson, their boss, and the way they use the dumbwaiter to communicate demonstrates this power imbalance. Midway through the play, Wilson (one presumes—it's never made clear who is upstairs) begins using the dumbwaiter to send Ben and Gus food orders written on pieces of paper. The orders come with no notes of explanation, and Ben and Gus lack the kitchen appliances and food necessary to fill the orders. Put simply, they're at a complete loss as to why Wilson is sending them these orders and what he wants them to do. In this way, the dumb waiter shows how Wilson's position of authority allows him to intimidate, manipulate, and exploit Ben and Gus without repercussion. The food orders confound Ben and Gus, yet they (and in particular Ben) are too terrified of disobeying and upsetting an authority figure to question Wilson's motives or explain that they are unable to fulfill his requests. Because Ben and Gus cannot communicate directly with Wilson, they remain uncertain about how to properly fulfill his requests and avoid punishment—and this leaves them utterly ill-equipped to do anything to improve their situation.

The dumb waiter also demonstrates how Ben and Gus's power

imbalance pits them against each other, ultimately playing a key role in Ben's betrayal of Gus. Eventually, Ben and Gus discover that the dumb waiter comes with a speaking-tube that people on different floors of the building can use to listen and speak to each other—this facilitates communication somewhat, but there are serious limitations. Only one person at a time can listen to or speak into the tube, and so it's only Ben, Gus's superior, whom the dumb waiter grants direct communication with Wilson. This means Gus must rely on Ben to relay Wilson's messages—and it also means he must trust that Ben is being truthful about what Wilson is saying. And with Ben's climactic betrayal of Gus (at the end of the play, it's revealed that Gus is the target that Ben must kill), the play makes it clear that Gus cannot trust Ben—yet his lower status leaves him with no other option. The dumb waiter thus shows how Gus's low-ranking position leaves him vulnerable to manipulation by authority figures that he can neither fight nor understand.

THE MATCHES

Matches symbolize Ben and Gus's powerlessness to improve their lives under exploitative hierarchies and working conditions. Matches first appear at the very beginning of *The Dumb Waiter* when Gus absurdly pulls an empty, flattened matchbox from his shoe. This confounding, seemingly random first appearance of matches alerts the audience to the play's absurdity, but it also shows how Ben and Gus's low status leaves them ill-equipped to fulfill even the most basic of needs: Gus announces many times throughout the play that he wants to make tea, yet he lacks the matches he needs to light the stove. Later, an unseen person slips an unmarked envelope containing 12 matches under the door to Ben and Gus's basement room. At first, this seems like a fortuitous and empowering development, and Gus and Ben seem to regard them as a sign that Wilson, their boss (and the person they assume left them the matches), is aware of and respectful of their needs: now, they'll finally be able to make tea and, in so doing, exercise a marginally greater degree of power over their present situation. But when the stove's gas shuts off, Gus realizes that Wilson hasn't sent them the matches as a gesture of goodwill; to the contrary, Gus sees the matches as just another one of Wilson's manipulative, exploitative games. Gus reasons that Wilson's giving them the matches is proof that he is surveilling them in some way and so is well aware of their needs and concerns. With this, the matches become a threat—a reminder of the powerful, unseeable authority figure that rules over Ben and Gus and has the power to manipulate and control them in ways they can neither predict nor understand. What's more, if Wilson is surveilling them, then he should also know that the gas has gone off, rendering the matches useless. Thus, it becomes clear to Gus that Wilson has sent them the matches not to help them out, but rather to taunt them with an object they desperately need but now have no way to use: it's a way of putting them in their place and reinforcing their powerlessness. The matches also remind Ben and Gus of Wilson's power: he sends them the matches to show them that he has the power to know what Ben and Gus need and the capacity to ensure that those needs are met—yet he actively chooses not to, apparently for no reason other than because he can.

BEN'S NEWSPAPER

Ben's newspaper symbolizes his struggle to exert power over Gus and also the broader link between power, violence, and intimidation. *The Dumb Waiter* opens with Ben reading a newspaper, as he does sporadically throughout the play. From the start, Ben's newspaper establishes him as the more educated, refined, and competent of the two characters (as Ben reads the newspaper, Gus struggles to tie his shoelaces), and this suggests that he is the pair's "senior partner"—the one with the higher social status. The newspaper's symbolic resonance comes from the way Ben uses it as a prop to exert his dominance over Gus. Throughout the play, Ben repeatedly "slams" the newspaper onto his bed or lowers it so that he can stare at Gus whenever Gus does or says something that Ben perceives as a threat to his power. For instance, after Gus suggests that a story about a young boy who watched his sister kill a cat is wrong—that it was actually the boy who killed the cat and lied that his sister did it—Ben agrees with Gus, and then he violently slams the paper onto the bed. Ben seems intimidated by Gus's perceptive take on the story, perhaps believing that Gus's insight jeopardizes Ben's status as the smarter and more powerful partner—or that Gus is intentionally trying to undermine Ben. To ensure that Gus remembers that Ben is in charge, Ben slams the paper onto the bed in a violent gesture that warns Gus that there will be consequences—potentially violent ones—if Gus inadvertently challenges Ben's authority again.

REVOLVERS

Ben and Gus's revolvers symbolize obedience to authority and the consequences of challenging authority. Ben, the senior partner and more compliant of the play's two central characters, keeps his revolver polished and regularly inspects it to ensure that it's in working order. This shows his commitment to his job—and more importantly, to obeying authority. Gus, by contrast, doesn't polish his revolver and doesn't inspect it before a job, and this leads Ben to accuse Gus of slacking on the job. Gus's poorly maintained gun thus reflects his wavering obedience to authority and propensity to challenge the orders their boss, Wilson, gives them rather than obey them without question, as Ben does. When Ben criticizes Gus for not properly maintaining his gun, he's really criticizing Gus for Gus's skepticism of authority. But if having a polished

and loaded revolver symbolizes a person's willingness to obey authority, it follows that a willingness to obey authority is what keeps someone armed and protected against danger. At the very end of the play, unarmed Gus re-enters the room through the right-hand door, revealing himself to be the target of Ben's hit as Ben raises and aims his revolver at Gus. In his vulnerable and doomed state, the unarmed Gus becomes a symbol for the power one loses when one disobeys authority, sets out on their own, and no longer enjoys the protections that come with existing within a broader social system.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *The Caretaker and the Dumb Waiter* published in 1994.

The Dumb Waiter Quotes

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.

GUS. Incredible.

Related Characters: Ben, Gus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Hitmen Ben and Gus are waiting around in a dismal, windowless basement room for their target to arrive. Ben reads a newspaper to pass the time and describes the violent and disturbing stories he reads there to Gus. One story involves an old man who takes the unconventional action of crawling underneath a lorry (truck) to get past a traffic-congested street—but the old man is crushed beneath the truck when traffic starts to ease up and the lorry drives forward. Ben and Gus both react to the story with disgust, with Ben noting that the story "make[s] you want to puke," and Gus claiming the story is "unbelievable."

This passage is important because it establishes early on the play's threatening atmosphere. Though there are very few moments in the play where physical violence plays out, the play is saturated with moments like this one, in which Ben or Gus allude to violence in their own lives or in the broader world. These moments work to establish the world of the play as one in which violence—and in particular the threat of violence—is abundant and hugely influential in shaping how people view the world and how that worldview affects their behavior. People who feel that violence and danger lurk around every corner—particularly people like the old man, who dared to think and act unconventionally and was effectively punished for his failure to do things by the book—are more likely to act in ways they feel will protect them against outside dangers. This is highly visible in Ben, for instance, who rigidly does everything his bosses ask of him without question, even if that means carrying out violent acts himself, because he believes that obeying authority will protect him against the world's many dangers.

Interestingly, though Ben describes the story as "enough to make you want to puke," he doesn't specify which part of the story sickens him—that the lorry ran over the man, or that the man was dumb enough to crawl under the lorry in the first place. If the latter is true, one may read Ben's disgusted response, then, not as an indictment of the man's violent end itself, but of the man's foolishness for thinking outside the box—something the man, to Ben's mind, should have known would create negative, violent consequences for him.

GUS. […] I mean, you come into a place when it's still dark, you come into a room you've never seen before, you sleep all day, you do your job, and then you go away in the night again.

Pause.

I like to get a look at the scenery. You never get a chance in this job.

Related Characters: Gus (speaker), Ben, Wilson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Gus and Ben are waiting to receive word from their boss, Wilson, that their target has arrived. They're currently in the dismal, windowless basement room that Wilson has ordered them to wait in, and Gus—much to Ben's displeasure—won't stop complaining about how dingy and unappealing the space is. Gus then segues into a broader

attack on the unpleasant aspects of their job as hitmen.

Ben and Gus are low on their crime organization's hierarchy, and as such, they're kept in the dark about the details of the hits they carry out, forced to rely on their higher-ups, like Wilson, for information. What's more—and as Gus implies in this passage—their superiors provide them with little space, keeping them physically and literally in the dark. Gus's complaints here focus on the unpleasant early (or late) hours their job forces them to keep (Gus and Ben generally only carry out one hit per week, but they have to be constantly on call and ready to go at a moment's notice, should they receive word that it's time to do a job). Gus's complaints also hint at how disrespected he feels by the employers that he and Ben answer to. The higher-ups' forcing Gus and Ben to arrive and leave in darkness suggests that Gus and Ben are so unimportant, so powerless, that they're not even worth being seen. It also suggests that their superiors have no qualms about exploiting Ben and Gus for their labor—about forcing two desperate, working-class men to do their dirty work for them—but feel no corresponding obligation to show appreciation or respect for the unsavory work they order them to do.

Gus's negative description of the job thus shows that he (unlike Ben) takes issue with the class hierarchy that allows for their exploitation, and that he's not content to simply accept the status quo as it is. It also shows that Gus, unlike Ben, is dissatisfied with how meaningless their lives are to the people who employ them. Gus is questioning why they even do what they do when nobody respects them for it, pointing toward the play's overarching theme of the meaninglessness and absurdity of life in a broader sense.

BEN. You know what your trouble is?

GUS. What?

BEN. You haven't got any interests.

Related Characters: Ben, Gus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

As Gus and Ben wait around for their target to arrive, Gus complains about the unreasonable schedule their higher-ups expect them to keep—though typically they only work once per week, they're required to be on call constantly and have to always be reachable, should their boss call them to say it's time to carry out a hit. Ben thinks Gus is being unreasonable, though, and has only himself to blame for being unsatisfied with his work-life balance. For Ben, Gus's employer isn't his problem—it's that he "ha[s]n't got any interests." Ben's remark positions him as opposite Gus. Whereas Gus questions the social and class hierarchies that allow for their employers to take advantage of them and exploit their labor, Ben accepts these hierarchies, believing instead that it's Gus and Ben's responsibility, as working-class people, to make the best of an unideal, exploitative system.

Ben doesn't even seem to see the system as exploitative at all. Rather, he implies here that if Gus had hobbies with which to occupy his time—Ben later notes that he enjoys woodworking, for instance—Gus could practice those hobbies during the hours he's on call, make better use of the time, and be more satisfied with his life. In short, Ben's criticisms here show that he sees complainers and agitators like Gus as the problem, and he sees the system that Gus complains about as comparatively blameless.

This passage thus establishes the central difference between Ben and Gus: Gus sees the social and class hierarchies that infringe upon his and Gus's life as fundamentally flawed and unjust and believes it's the system that needs to change. Meanwhile, Ben accepts these hierarches and believes it's Ben and Gus's responsibility as working-class people—as mostly powerless people—to modify their attitudes to make their lives meaningful despite their relative powerlessness.

GUS. […] He doesn't seem to bother much about our comfort these days.

Related Characters: Gus (speaker), Ben, Wilson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

As Gus and Ben wait to receive word from their boss, Wilson, that it's time to carry out their hit, Gus complains about how Wilson "doesn't seem to bother much about [Gus and Ben's] comfort these days." Gus's complaint stems from the shoddy conditions of the room Wilson has ordered them to stay in as they wait for word that it's time to carry out that week's hit. The room is windowless, scantily

furnished, and lacking in basic amenities like food, clean linens on their beds, and money to run the metered gas stove. Gus sees the room's lacking amenities as evidence that Wilson undervalues them and the unsavory work they do for him—that he believes he has a right to their labor, regardless of whether he provides them with basic comforts or adequate compensation. Instead, he treats them as second-class citizens whose lower rank in the company (and lower-class status in general) denies them the protections, compensation, and underlying respect that their organization grants to higher-ranking members (and in a broader sense, that society gives to people of higher classes). In short, Gus doesn't think their low rank is an excuse for Wilson to exploit them.

BEN. Go and light it.

GUS. Light what?

BEN. The kettle.

GUS. You mean the gas.

BEN. Who does?

GUS. You do.

BEN (*his eyes narrowing*). What do you mean, I mean the gas?

GUS. Well, that's what you mean, don't you? The gas?

BEN (*powerfully*). If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.

GUS. How can you light a kettle?

BEN. It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech!

GUS. I've never heard it.

BEN. Light the kettle! It's common usage!

Related Characters: Ben, Gus (speaker), Wilson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

After an unknown, unseen figure slides an envelope of matches under the door to Gus and Ben's room, Ben orders Gus to "light the kettle" and prepare tea in the kitchenette next to their room. An argument ensues when Gus interprets Ben's words literally as opposed to the "figure of speech" Ben believes his words to be. Speaking literally, Gus claims it's impossible to "light a kettle" and argues that what Ben really meant to say was "[light] the gas." This seemingly inane, trivial exchange resonates with a number of the play's central themes.

For starters, the nonsensical, circuitous dialogue demonstrates the play's adherence to conventions of absurdist theater. Absurdist theater (and absurdist fiction more broadly) illustrates the ultimate meaninglessness and futility of life and the human condition. One of the ways it does this is through language, specifically showing how breakdowns in communication render human interactions and relationships pointless and incapable of creating meaning. Here, Gus and Ben's inability—or perhaps unwillingness—to use language to understand each other and communicate effectively underscores the futility of using language to connect with others. Ben insists on speaking idiomatically, whereas Gus insists on speaking literally. They remain unwilling or incapable of finding a middle ground they can both understand, and as such, their interaction ends in conflict and misunderstanding—and thus fails in the central goal of language to give meaning and purpose to human interactions and life itself.

This passage also alludes to Ben's class anxiety and the way it causes him to obey authority. As is often the case in *The Dumb Waiter*, Ben's motivations for using the expression "light the gas" and then for refusing to entertain Gus's confusion remain ambiguous. One interpretation, though, is that Ben is intentionally using slang and "figure[s] of speech" that are "common" among upper classes—but largely foreign to members of the lower classes, like Gus. Ben resents his lower-class status but ultimately believes in the justness of class hierarchies—thus his primary goal is not to dismantle the hierarchies that exploit him, but to move up within those existing hierarchies and thereby increase his power. One way he believes he can do this is by speaking the language of the social classes whose ranks he longs to join.

Gus, by contrast, has no such aspirations. He resents not his lower-class status for inviting exploitation and discrimination—but the very social/class hierarchies that invite and perpetuate such exploitation in the first place. As such, he has no desire or incentive to speak the language "common" to people with more authority than him, and this is why he refuses to entertain Ben's ranting and raving about what's "common usage" and what's not.

BEN. […] Gus, I'm not trying to be unreasonable. I'm just trying to point out something to you.

GUS. Yes, but—

BEN. Who's the senior partner here, me or you?

GUS. You.

BEN. I'm only looking after your interests, Gus. You've got to learn, mate.

Related Characters: Ben, Gus (speaker), Wilson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Ben and Gus are in the middle of a nonsensical argument over whether it's more correct to say "light the kettle" (Ben's stance) or "light the gas" (Gus's stance). Ben argues that "light the kettle" is a common saying that most people know and use, whereas Gus has never heard of this saying before and argues that it's more correct to say "light the gas," since this is what one literally does when one strikes a match to ignite a gas stove. While Ben and Gus's argument is about semantics in a literal sense, ultimately, the point of their argument gets at something deeper: the risks of not conforming to social convention (as represented by the common saying "light the kettle) and the protections one is afforded when they obey authority and uphold the status quo (what Ben is symbolically doing by using common expressions).

The subtext of Ben's words gets at the broader idea that it's in Gus's best interests to back off and obey authority (in this case, Ben) without question, even if Gus isn't convinced that his superiors are correct. This is what Ben means when he claims to be "looking after [Gus's] interests." He's encouraging Gus to keep his thoughts—particularly his critical thoughts—to himself so as to ensure that Gus's nonconformist attitude doesn't ruffle the wrong person's feathers. Though Ben is taking the time to educate Gus on why Gus is wrong, other authority figures, such as their boss, Wilson, may not be so patient and understanding.

Ultimately, Ben's advice to Gus foreshadows Gus's violent end: the final moments of the play reveal that Gus has been the target all along. Why Gus and Ben's superiors have chosen to place a hit on Gus remain ambiguous, but the play strongly suggests that it was Gus's unyielding curiosity and refusal to obey authority figures' orders without question that convinced his superiors to see him as a potential liability and decide to eliminate him. This scene, in which Ben cautions Gus about the dangers of challenging authority, contributes to this interpretation of Gus's fate.

BEN. Stop wondering. You've got a job to do. Why don't you just do it and shut up?

Related Characters: Ben (speaker), Gus, Wilson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

After an extended, inane argument over semantics, Gus yields to Ben and follows his orders to go to the kitchenette to "light the kettle" to prepare tea. When he returns, he starts to question Ben about the specifics of the current job (Ben is Gus's superior, and so Gus assumes that Ben is privy to more information than he is). But Ben cuts him off, suggesting that Gus has "a job to do, and so he'd better "just do it and shut up[.]" In other words, he's advising Gus that it's in his best interests to not ask so many questions and simply do what's asked of him.

The exchange is typical of Gus and Ben's interactions with each other over the course of the play: Gus irritates Ben with his endless questions about their job, and Ben scolds Gus for questioning authority—whether the authority figure in question is Ben, the more experienced of the two hitmen, or Wilson, both men's boss—and not simply doing as he's told.

Ben's remarks here illustrate his core belief in the importance of obeying authority. Ben, like Gus, belongs to the working class and is thus low in the social hierarchy. He's also unhappy with his lower-class status. But this is where their similarities end. Gus's repeated complaints about their boss and the way he exploits Ben and Gus's labor suggests that Gus questions the overarching economic and social hierarchies that allow people in positions of power to exploit the powerless. But Ben—as this passage implies—seems to accept existing hierarchies, even if his low rank within those hierarchies invites more powerful people to exploit and manipulate him: he has "a job to do" and so believes he has a responsibility to do it—no questions asked. Ben's motivations for thinking this way are complicated and largely left ambiguous.

One interpretation is that Ben would rather focus his

efforts on rising through the ranks to eventually achieve more economic stability and, ultimately, more power; this interpretation is supported by the fact that Ben, perhaps because of his willingness to obey authority, has managed to achieve more power relative to Gus: he's Gus's superior, and this makes him privy to more information and direct contact with their superiors than Gus. And ultimately, Ben's obedience to authority protects him in an even more consequential way: in the final moments of the play, it's revealed that Gus is in fact the target of that night's hit, and it's Ben who's forced to betray and kill his partner.

While this shocking final scene proves that Ben's obedience to authority has indeed protected him—it's spared him his life—it also shows the limitations that Ben's low rank imposes on him: though his conformist sensibilities spare him his life, they also force him to betray his partner and commit an egregious act of violence against another person. The play's final moments thus shed light on the limitations of the conformist sentiment that Ben conveys in this passage. If Ben is to follow his own advice, then he has no choice but to "just do" the job he's been tasked to do—kill Gus.

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?

BEN. Who what's going to be?

They look at each other.

GUS (*at length*). Who it's going to be.

Silence.

Related Characters: Ben, Gus (speaker), Wilson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Hitmen Ben and Gus continue to wait for a call from Wilson, their boss, alerting them that it's time to carry out their hit. As they wait, Gus, Ben's subordinate who is kept uninformed about all critical information related to their hits, presses Ben for the details of tonight's hit. Ben repeatedly refuses to answer Gus's questions and scolds him for not simply doing as he's told. In this passage, Gus continues to pester Ben for more information—and Ben denies him answers yet again.

This passage demonstrates one of the play's defining features: circuitous, nonsensical dialogue. To the audience, Ben's confused reaction to Gus's rather obvious question should seem entirely illogical and uncalled for: after all, what other job than the job they're currently doing could Gus possibly be asking about? It's plausible to interpret Ben's apparent "confusion," thus, as Ben being willfully obtuse: in other words, it's not that Ben doesn't understand what Gus is asking him—he simply doesn't want to answer Gus's question and is thus feigning confusion to avoid doing so.

So much of the play is left ambiguous that it's impossible to say with certainty why Ben refuses to answer Gus's questions about "who it's going to be tonight" ("it" referring to the target of their hit). It could be that Ben simply wants to discourage Gus's inappropriate habit of questioning authority. It could also be that Ben already knows the shocking truth that the play only reveals in its final moments: that Gus is in fact the target of their hit, and he doesn't want to alert Gus to this fact and compromise the success of the hit.

Regardless, Ben's refusal to answer Gus's question—and his (feigned or sincere) confusion about what Gus is even asking him in the first place—demonstrates two things: the limitations of language to express ideas and create meaning (a feature of absurdist theater) and Ben's unyielding commitment to knowing one's place and not questioning authority.

GUS (thoughtfully). I find him hard to talk to, Wilson. Do you know that, Ben?

BEN. Scrub round it, will you?

Pause.

GUS. There are a number of things I want to ask him. But I never get round to it, when I see him.

Related Characters: Ben, Gus (speaker), Wilson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 101-102

Explanation and Analysis

Hitmen Ben and Gus wait in a dismal, windowless basement room for the target of their hit to arrive. As they wait, Gus grumbles about their boss, Wilson's, failure to communicate transparently with them and his failure to adequately compensate them for their work. Gus wants to voice these issues to Wilson but, as Gus reveals in this passage, he "find[s] him hard to talk to, Wilson." Gus never clarifies what he means by this. And Ben, as this passage shows, doesn't ask him to elaborate (by this point, it's well established that Ben condemns Gus's disrespect for authority and actively discourages Gus from asking so many questions about their job). The audience is thus forced to speculate about what Gus means when he describes Wilson as "hard to talk to[.]"

Throughout the play, Gus criticizes Wilson for taking for granted the work that Gus and Ben do for him, for not valuing their time (most of their job involves being on call 24/7 in the event that Wilson calls them to carry out a hit at a moment's notice), and for not providing them with basic comforts like food and working plumbing while they wait to carry out a hit. Gus later suggests that Wilson and the other (presumably wealthy) people who use the dumb waiter to send down food orders that Ben and Gus have no means of filling have no respect for Ben and Gus and are simply messing with them because their higher-class status allows them to do so without consequence.

Gus's complaints suggest a keen awareness—and criticism—of the power imbalance that exists between Gus and Ben and their employer. With this in mind, then, the audience may speculate that Gus "find[s Wilson] hard to talk to" because their class differences creates a wide, unsurmountable distance between them. Wilson's power over Ben and Gus makes him unsympathetic to the suffering that their relative powerlessness thrusts upon them. Meanwhile, Gus's lower-class status inhibits him from knowing and understanding how to communicate with Wilson—existing class/social hierarchies have no protocol in place for how and when to challenge an authority figure, much less what language one should use in order to communicate one's grievances coherently and effectively.

> BEN. You'll get a swipe round your earhole if you don't watch your step.

Related Characters: Ben (speaker), Gus, Wilson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

As hitmen Ben and Gus wait for the target of a hit to arrive, Gus tries to talk to Ben about a previous hit they carried out on a woman. But Ben would prefer that Gus simply do as he's told—that Gus neither think too much about past hits, nor ask too many questions about future hits. "You'll get a swipe round your earhole if you don't watch your step[,]" he cautions Ben, insinuating that either Ben—or Gus and Ben's higher-ups—will force Gus to stop being so curious if Gus doesn't do so voluntarily.

Though *The Dumb Waiter* features very few moments of physical violence, it conveys a thoroughly menacing atmosphere, mainly through recurrent threats or allusions to violence, as Ben's warning to Gus to "watch your step" demonstrates. These recurrent threats of danger resonate with the play's larger themes of obedience to authority, power, and conformity. In this passage, Ben is suggesting to Gus that failing to obey authority will have serious consequences, a warning that Gus fails to heed, ultimately sealing his grim fate: in the final moments of the play, it's revealed that Gus is in fact the target he and Ben have been waiting for, suggesting that, as Ben warned Gus, Gus's failure to "watch [his] step" and stop asking so many questions has led to his death.

> GUS. […] She wasn't much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn't it? It was a mess. Honest, I can't remember a mess like that one. They don't seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn't she spread, eh? She didn't half spread. Kaw! I've been meaning to ask you.
>
> BEN *sits up and clenches his eyes.*
>
> Who cleans up after we've gone? I'm curious about that. Who does the clearing up? […]

Related Characters: Ben, Gus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102-103

Explanation and Analysis

Hitmen Ben and Gus sit in a windowless basement room awaiting the arrival of their target. Gus—despite Ben's clear

discomfort—starts to talk about a previous hit they carried out, one that involved a woman and that was apparently "a mess[.]" Gus describes the woman's violent death in indirect but nonetheless descriptive terms, suggesting his clear fixation—or even his horror—with the violent act that he and Ben inflicted on the woman. "They don't seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like[,]" muses Gus, seemingly alluding to the (unscientific) idea that women's blood "spread[s]" differently than men's. Gus's observations about the woman seems to be more than morbid fascination—he seems almost troubled by or disbelieving of the violence he and Ben inflicted upon the woman, and the similar acts of violence their job as hitmen force them to commit against other targets.

Gus's follow-up question, "Who cleans up after we're gone?" may thus be interpreted literally or figuratively. Literally, he's asking Ben if anybody cleans up the gory aftermath of their targeted hits. Figuratively, though, Gus's question points toward the problem of who or what moral framework or overarching institutional power absolves them of their wrongdoings—who picks up the pieces in the aftermath of the violence they commit against others? Unlike Ben, who obeys authority regardless of his personal feelings on what they ask him to do (and his instinct to "clench[] his eyes" the moment Gus starts talking about a previous hit suggests that he does have some serious moral reservations about the work), Gus seems to have a harder time going along with hits just because he's asked to. He examines his work from an outsider, independent perspective—and this inhibits him from becoming desensitized to the acts of violence that he and Ben perform.

GUS. […] Do you mean I can keep the Eccles cake then?

BEN. Keep it?

GUS. Well, they don't know we've got it, do they?

BEN. That's not the point.

Related Characters: Ben, Gus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Hitmen Ben and Gus discover a hidden dumb waiter in the wall of the basement room they're hanging out in while awaiting the arrival of their target. People at a café upstairs (or Ben and Gus's higher-ups in the crime organization they work for—the play never makes it clear exactly who is upstairs) start using the dumb waiter to send down food orders for Ben and Gus to fill. But Ben and Gus lack the supplies and equipment necessary to fill these orders, and so Ben orders Gus to send up the snack food items that Gus packed in his overnight bag. Gus calls up into the chute, announcing each item as he places it on the dumb waiter to be sent back upstairs. He doesn't name the Eccles cake, though (a type of pastry), and so he asks Ben, "Do you mean I can keep the Eccles cake then?" Gus thinks that since the people upstairs don't know they have the cake (because Gus never called upstairs to announce it), then it's okay to keep it, since they won't be reprimanded.

But Ben replies, "That's not the point." His response reaffirms what the play has already made clear about Ben's character: he is unwaveringly committed to obeying authority, even when it's unlikely that he'll be found out and reprimanded for not following orders. Gus is arguing that he and Ben don't need to act with deference if no authority figures are around to judge them, which further illustrates Gus's characteristic tendency to challenge and undermine authority. But Ben seems to have fully internalized the need to obey authority and uphold the status quo. His deference isn't merely a method of avoiding punishment and consequences—it's principled and reflects a deep-seated embrace of social and class hierarchies and the power imbalances they create and sustain.

GUS (*calling up the hatch*). Three McVitie and Price! One Lyons Red Label! One Smith's Crisps! One Eccles cake! One Fruit and Nut!

BEN. Cadbury's.

GUS (*up the hatch*). Cadbury's!

Related Characters: Ben, Gus (speaker), Wilson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Hitmen Ben and Gus discover a hidden dumb waiter in the wall of the basement room they're hanging out in as they await the arrival of their target. The dumb waiter starts

sending down mysterious food orders from what Ben explains is a café upstairs (the orders may also be coded messages from Ben and Gus's superiors—the play never makes it clear exactly who is sending the messages and why they're sending them), but Ben and Gus lack the supplies, equipment, and means required to fill the orders. Still, Ben insists he and Gus at least send *something* upstairs, and so he orders Gus to send up the snack foods Gus brought with him to the room. Gus obliges, calling up the hatch to announce each food he places inside the box that rests atop the dumb waiter platform.

First off, the dumb waiter plot embodies the absurdism that courses through the play. Works of absurdism frequently place characters in nonsensical, impossible positions, such as tasks that have no clear meaning or purpose or means of completing them. The task the dumb waiter presents to Ben and Gus is exactly this: Ben and Gus aren't professional chefs, and even if they were, they have none of the supplies needed to fill the orders. What's more, it's left totally unclear—to Ben and Gus, and to the audience—why Ben and Gus, hitmen, are being asked to fill food orders, much less why the people upstairs continue to send down increasingly complicated orders that Ben and Gus clearly have no means to fulfill.

The context of this scene is also important. Just before Ben and Gus send up Gus's snack food, the dumb waiter sends them an order for "Ormitha Macarounada," a (nonsensical, nonexistent) Greek dish that Gus proclaimed to be "pretty high class." Given this, it's clear that Gus is announcing the brand name of each item he places on the dumb waiter to try to appeal to the "pretty high class" tastes of the people upstairs.

Gus, unlike Ben, is less self-conscious of his lower-class status. Whereas Ben resents his low rank in the class hierarchy, Gus resents the hierarchy itself, condemning the wealthier, powerful people who use their high rank to exploit and look down upon working-class people like Gus and Ben. Still, this passage illustrates that even Gus isn't immune to class anxieties, as he makes clear when he is careful to announce the brand name of each item he places on the dumb waiter, as though the higher-ranking people upstairs will have more respect for Ben and Gus if they send up a "Cadbury's" chocolate bar as opposed to a generic (and cheaper) candy bar.

GUS. This is some place. No tea and biscuits.

BEN. Eating makes you lazy, mate. You're getting lazy, you know that? You don't want to get slack on your job.

GUS. Who me?

BEN. Slack, mate, slack.

GUS. Who me? Slack?

BEN. Have you checked your gun? You haven't even checked your gun. It looks disgraceful, anyway. Why don't you ever polish it?

Related Characters: Ben, Gus (speaker), Wilson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 108-109

Explanation and Analysis

Hitmen Ben and Gus are in a basement room awaiting the arrival of their target. Gus spends much of their time there complaining about how dingy and ill-equipped the place is. He sees this as yet more evidence that his and Ben's boss, Wilson, undervalues them as people and workers. Gus's criticism of the room and Wilson are symptomatic of his broader negative attitude toward the social and class hierarchies that exploit and look down on working-class people like Ben and Gus. In other words, Gus blames an exploitative class hierarchy—and the people like Wilson who benefit from it—for his and Ben's inadequate living and working conditions.

Ben's remarks in this passage reveal his opposing viewpoint. Unlike Gus, Ben respects the system, and though he's unhappy with and maybe even ashamed of his lower-class status, his idea about how to improve his life involves moving up in the system—not dismantling it. So, when Ben calls Gus "disgraceful" for not polishing his revolver and for complaining about being hungry, Ben is criticizing Gus for not obeying authority without question and, by extension, for not respecting the social hierarchy—both of which Ben believes are necessary in order to improve one's condition and make a meaningful life for oneself. The fact that Ben suggests that something as necessary as "eating" makes Gus "lazy" should show the audience how deluded Ben is, though—how he has internalized the disrespect and dehumanization that an exploitative social hierarchy has thrust upon himself and Gus as lower-class people. Eating is a basic human need, and it's clearly misguided for Ben to suggest that Gus should respect his duty to authority

instead of filling that basic need.

BEN. […] Do you know what it takes to make an Ormitha Macarounada?

Related Characters: Ben (speaker), Gus, Wilson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Hitmen Ben and Gus are in a basement room awaiting their target's arrival when they discover a hidden dumb waiter in one of the walls. A café upstairs (or the men's superiors—it's never made clear exactly who is upstairs) starts to use the dumb waiter to send them increasingly complicated food orders—which, lacking both ingredients and cooking equipment, they have no ability to fill. One order asks for an "Ormitha Macarounada," a dish Ben claims is "Greek," high-class, and extremely difficult to make—but which is in fact nonsensical and completely made-up.

Ben's mistake shows the limitations of his obedience to authority. Ben's intention in asking Gus if he "know[s] what it takes to make an Ormitha Macarounada" was to put Gus in his place and show how ignorant and classless he is—especially compared to Ben, his superior. Ben pretends to know what the dish is to show Gus that Ben's relative authority over Gus places him in a different class and makes him privy to more information and power than Gus.

But Ben's plan backfires. Ben never becomes aware of his error, but the audience recognizes that Ben, in trying to play Gus for a fool, has allowed the supposedly "high class" people upstairs to make a fool of *him*—and he's also made a fool of himself: his efforts to ingratiate himself with higher-ranking people and boast a working knowledge of their higher-class tastes have only revealed how out of touch and ignorant he is. Ben believes that in obeying authority and upholding the status quo, he can rise through the ranks and achieve a greater level of power, but moments like this one show the audience the futility of Ben's efforts to improve himself within an exploitative system.

BEN. Do you know what he said? Light the kettle! Not put on the kettle! Not light the gas! But light the kettle!

GUS. How can we light the kettle?

BEN. What do you mean?

GUS. There's no gas.

Related Characters: Ben, Gus (speaker), Wilson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 112-113

Explanation and Analysis

Ben ends his "call" (via the speaking tube) with Wilson and announces that Wilson wants them to make him tea. But what Ben's really excited about is the words Wilson used to make this order: "Light the kettle." This is the supposedly "common saying" that Ben used earlier and that he and Gus fought over (Gus argued that the correct phrase was "put on the kettle" or "light the gas," neither of which Wilson used). Ben feels validated by Wilson's saying "light the kettle." He thinks it means that he has been accepted by their more powerful (and presumably wealthier) boss and so has the means and opportunity to rise up through the ranks himself. Correspondingly, he sees Gus's ignorance about upper-class language as confirmation that he is less worthy of success and destined to remain at the bottom of the food chain.

But Gus sees Ben and Wilson's shared language for what it is: a meaningless, empty gesture. And so Gus redirects Ben's attention toward the literal, physical conditions of their situation: they have no gas to "light the kettle." Gus correctly recognizes that Ben knowing the language of the upper classes (or, at least, the more powerful) doesn't actually mean he has the power they have: it's merely a ploy to get him to feel that he's an insider when he's really not. In fact, he's really below them and under their thumb. Whether or not Wilson tells Ben and Gus to "light the kettle," "put on the kettle," or "light the gas" doesn't change the fact that they have no gas with which to ignite the stove—that an exploitative hierarchy has robbed them of the resources they need to do their job and be taken care of themselves and improve their condition. And to add insult to injury, that same hierarchy systematically manipulates lower-class, opportunistic people like Ben into thinking that an empty gesture like using the same slang means they have the means to improve their condition and rise through the ranks when really, it's little more than semantics.

GUS. […] What about us?

Related Characters: Gus (speaker), Ben, Wilson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Ben has just hung up the speaking tube, which he was using to communicate with his and Gus's boss, Wilson, who is upstairs. He then informs Gus that Wilson is dissatisfied with the food Ben and Gus sent upstairs on the dumb waiter and would like tea instead. Instead of following orders and preparing the tea for Wilson, as Ben expects him to do, Gus asks Ben, "What about us?" Gus has been wanting tea for the entirety of the play but hasn't been able to make any, first because they had no matches to light the stove, and then, after an unseen person slipped an envelope of matches under the door, because they had no money to run the metered gas stove.

Gus's question indirectly calls out Wilson (and the higher-ups of the crime organization in general) for disregarding Ben and Gus's basic needs and exploiting them for their labor. Wilson has made no effort to ensure that Ben and Gus have food to eat, tea to drink, and fresh linens to sleep on during their long wait in the basement room. Not only that, but he's also left Ben and Gus entirely in the dark about how long they'll have to wait in the room for the target of their hit to arrive. And yet, he expects Gus and Ben to see that *his* needs are met.

Ben obeys authority without question, even when it's increasingly clear (and really, has been clear all along) that their superiors have no respect for Ben and Gus as people—they merely see them as desperate, working-class people whose limited means force them to take whatever work they can get, even if that work is exploitative, demeaning, and underpaid.

This passage further develops the dumb waiter and matches as the play's key symbols. Ben sees the matches Wilson has provided them as a raw material Ben and Gus can use to complete a task to their employer's satisfaction, hopefully to the extent that they may improve their position within the company and so improve their class status and quality of life. Ben also seems to regard the mechanism of the dumb waiter (which uses a pulley system to raise and lower a platform between the floors of a house) as symbolizing that upward motion. To Ben's mind, he and Gus can rise through the ranks just as the dumb waiter raises food from the basement to the upper floor.

But in fact, and as Gus's question suggests here, the dumb waiter actually just allows the upper classes (on the upper floor) to benefit from the labor of lower-class people (on the lower floor). It allows them to receive and benefit from the fruits of Ben and Gus's labor, all without having to deal with them directly and without having to see to Ben and Gus's needs.

GUS. […] We send him up all we've got and he's not satisfied. No, honest, it's enough to make the cat laugh. Why did you send him up all that stuff? (*Thoughtfully.*) Why did I send it up? […]

Related Characters: Gus (speaker), Ben, Wilson

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Ben has just hung up the speaking tube, which he was using to communicate with his and Gus's boss, Wilson, upstairs, and told Gus that Wilson was apparently dissatisfied with the snack foods that Ben and Gus sent up to him on the dumb waiter. Apparently, everything was spoiled or stale, and now he wants tea instead. Instead of jumping into action and preparing tea (as Ben expects Gus to do), Gus questions why they're doing anything for Wilson in the first place.

Gus's questions, "Why did you send him up all that stuff?" and "Why did I send it up?" refer specifically to Gus and Ben's action of sending up foods on the dumb waiter. But he's questioning this specific instance to more broadly challenge his and Ben's incentives and motivations for obeying authority at all. In other words, Gus is asking why he and Ben continue to give their time, bodies, and minds to an exploitative social/class hierarchy that uses them for their labor, doesn't value them as people, and is never "satisfied" with them—no matter how much work they put into their job.

Ben, unlike Gus, seems to believe that if he only works diligently enough and obeys authority without question, his efforts will pay off and he'll be rewarded, perhaps with a rise in rank or pay. But Gus, in this passage, reveals that he has

no such delusions about working-class people's capacity to move up in an exploitative hierarchy that runs on exploiting the labor of the lower classes and keeping them subdued, ignorant, and powerless. Ben believes that if they only send up enough food, the people who run things and dole out power will recognize his merits—that he'll be able to improve his position and achieve a better quality of life.

The ludicrousness and absurdity of what the people upstairs are asking Ben and Gus to do (via the orders they send down on the dumb waiter)—prepare increasingly elaborate, complicated meals with no food and no cooking supplies at their disposal—illustrates the pointlessness of trying to rise up in an exploitative system that works by keeping oppressed people oppressed and empowered people empowered. The food orders are merely a ploy meant to trick Ben and Gus into thinking they have the means and opportunity to satisfy their employers and improve their condition, when in reality, it is physically impossible for them to complete the tasks their employers ask of them, and so, too, for them to improve their condition.

GUS. What do we do if it's a girl?

BEN. We do the same.

GUS. Exactly the same?

BEN. Exactly.

Pause.

GUS. We don't do anything different?

BEN. We do exactly the same.

GUS. Oh.

Related Characters: Gus (speaker), Ben, Wilson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

Ben says it's nearly time for himself and Gus to carry out their hit. To ensure the hit's success, they walk through all the steps they'll take to perform it, like how they'll position themselves in the room and when to pull their guns. As they're wrapping things up, Gus asks Ben if anything they've just discussed changes "if it's a girl[.]" That is, will they deviate from their plan of attack if the target is a woman instead of a man? Ben, without a pause, says no—they'll "do the same" regardless of the hit's gender. The immediacy of Ben's response reflects his unwavering obedience to authority. Gus's question seems to imply that Gus expects they might carry out the target in a different manner or perhaps even call it off altogether if the target is a woman. Regardless of whether it's logistics or morality that has motivated Gus to ask this question, the fact that he's questioning their plans in the first place shows that he's actively thinking about the hit on his own terms—not just blindly following orders.

Ben's response—both in its content and the immediacy with which he delivers it—reveals that he isn't thinking about the logistics or moral ramifications of the hit at all. His blind obedience to authority prohibits him from thinking for himself, and this passage shows how blind obedience can cause Ben to unwittingly—or at least, indifferently—carry out morally unsound acts of violence.

The door right opens sharply. BEN *turns, his revolver levelled at the door.*

GUS *stumbles in.*

He is stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and revolver.

He stops, body stooping, his arms at his sides.

He raises his head and looks at BEN.

A long silence.

They stare at each other.

Related Characters: Ben, Gus, Wilson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final stage directions of the play. After Gus leaves the room momentarily, Ben receives word that their target's arrival is imminent and calls for Gus to return to the room. Gus does, but he walks through the right-hand door—the door the target is supposed to walk through—thus revealing that *he* is in fact the target.

This shocking turn of events reveals with a grim frankness the degree to which exploitative working conditions and hierarchies have pitted Gus and Ben against each other. The play leaves it ambiguous whether Ben has known all along that Gus is the target (and this certainly would explain Ben's reluctance to discuss the hit with Gus up to this point, along

with some of Ben's other odd behaviors throughout the play) or whether he only found out the moment Gus walked through the door. Either way, that the stage directions call for Gus and Ben to stare at each other blankly shows that they are both deeply shocked and troubled by the dire situation their work has forced upon them. Though Ben is Gus's superior, this moment, in which Ben is forced to make the brutal decision to betray and kill his partner, reveals just how little power he has. He seems to believe that obeying authority and working within the system will allow him to improve his life, and yet, as this scene suggests, Ben's conformist attitude really only forces him to act immorally and against his best interests and the best interests of his peers again and again.

The image of Ben with his revolver levelled at Gus, then, becomes a metaphor for the way that exploitative working conditions and hierarchies pit workers against each other, incentivizing working-class people to betray their peers to gain and maintain power—all the while forcing people to make decisions that are against their best interests and the best interests of their peers time and time again.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE DUMB WAITER

The scene is a basement room with two beds positioned side by side against the back wall. Between the beds is a closed serving hatch. There's a door that leads to the kitchen and bathroom to the left of the beds and a door that leads to a passage to their right. Ben lies on the left bed reading a **newspaper**. Gus is sitting on the right bed, struggling to tie his shoes. The men are dressed identically in shirts, pants, and braces (suspenders).

Gus and Ben's matching uniforms suggest that they're workers and perhaps are currently on the job, though the scantily furnished room offers little context as to what that job might be. Though the men are dressed identically, their actions in this opening scene imply that they're not quite equal in status: that Ben reads a paper suggests that he is educated, competent, and refined. Gus, meanwhile, struggles to complete the basic task of tying his shoes.

Ben silently watches as Gus finishes tying his shoelaces and then walks slowly to the left door. Then Gus stops, shakes his foot, unties his shoelace, and removes his shoe. He picks up the shoe, reaches inside, and removes a **matchbox**. Gus shakes the matchbox and locks eyes with Ben before continuing toward the door. But then he stops again, shakes his other foot, unties his shoelace, and removes his shoe. Inside, he finds a flattened cigarette packet. Again, he and Ben exchange a look. Then Gus puts his shoes back on and exits through the left door. Frustrated, Ben drops his **paper** on the bed. He stares at the door. There's the sound of a lavatory chain being pulled, and then Gus returns to the room.

Pinter is known for the frequent pauses and silences he writes into his stage directions. There has been no dialogue between Gus and Ben thus far, and this should heighten the audience's focus on their actions *instead. Ben's close watch over Gus presents additional evidence that Ben is Gus's superior—it's as though Ben is waiting for Gus to mess up so that he can reprimand him. The detail of Gus removing a matchbox from his shoe is odd, and it alerts the audience to the play's absurdist features. That everyone—Ben, Gus, and the audience—is focused on Gus pulling the flattened (and presumably empty) matchbox from his shoe also alerts the audience to the matchbox's potential symbolic relevance. The matchbox is thus something that's worth paying attention to as the play progresses.*

Ben cries out, "Kaw!" Then he picks up his **paper** and tells Gus about a story he just read about an elderly man who couldn't find a way to cross a traffic-congested street, so he crawled under a lorry. The lorry started moving and ran the man over. The story makes Ben want to puke, but Gus is disbelieving. They sit in silence for a beat, then Gus exits through the left door again. Someone pulls the lavatory chain, but the lavatory doesn't flush.

The story of the man getting run over by a lorry (truck) injects a menacing undertone into the play's atmosphere—it sends a message that the world of the play is one where danger and violence are common, ever-present threats. Also note that Ben's comment about the story making him want to puke doesn't specify which part of the story sickens him—the fact that the man was run over, or the fact that the man was foolish enough to think that his innovative, dangerous strategy of averting traffic would work. If the latter is true, it portrays Ben as a character who values conformity and believes that going against the grain—that is, rejecting existing social conventions and rules—only hurts people. Conforming to social norms and obeying authority, by contrast, protects people. Also note that this is the second time that pulling the lavatory chain hasn't caused the lavatory to flush, implying that this seemingly innocuous detail is in fact quite important.

Gus returns to the room. He says he has a question for Ben, but before he can ask it, Ben asks Gus what he was doing outside the room. Before Gus can answer, Ben tells Gus to make some tea, and Gus says he will. Gus sits in a chair and remarks thoughtfully on the nice crockery that "he" has set out. He plans to tell "him" that the crockery is nice. Ben reads his **paper** silently while Gus goes on about how nice the crockery is. Ben asks Gus why he's so interested in plates when he's not going to eat. Gus says he has some biscuits. Then Gus, remembering the flattened cigarette packet, asks Ben if he has any cigarettes—Gus has run out. Ben says nothing.

Ben's refusal to let Gus ask or answer questions further establishes Gus as Ben's subordinate and the play's more submissive character. Furthermore, Ben's refusal to answer Gus about cigarettes shows he doesn't care about Gus's wants or needs. Already, the play has established a connection between a person's power and a person's ability—and perhaps even their incentive—to exploit people with less power. Finally, note Gus's mysterious reference to an unknown "he" responsible for laying out fancy crockery (tableware). It's yet unclear who this person is, but Gus's focus on the high-quality crockery this person apparently has access to introduces themes of class and economic disparity. It's not clear who this "he" is, but it seems that he, with his nice dishware, is wealthier than Ben and Gus, who have few possessions other than their work uniforms. Also note how Ben continues to order Gus around, interrupt him, and ignore his questions, suggesting that Ben feels his higher status entitles him to disrespect Gus—he even orders Gus to make him tea, as though Gus were his servant rather than (presumably) his partner.

Gus tells Ben he hopes this job won't take long. Then, he repeats that he has a question for Ben. Ben ignores Gus and slams his **paper** onto the bed. Then Ben describes another story. This one is about an eight-year-old girl who killed a cat. Gus doesn't believe it. Ben says the girl's brother was in the toolshed and watched his sister do it. Gus guesses that the brother actually killed the cat, and Ben agrees. With disgust, Ben remarks, "It's enough to—" But Gus cuts Ben off to ask when "he" will contact them. Ben scolds Gus for asking so many questions. He says that "he" could contact them at "any time."

Gus keeps talking about a job, but it's still unclear what that job is. Ben's second newspaper story is just as violent as the first—and perhaps even more disturbing, as it implicates a young child in a heinous act of violence. This further establishes that the world of the play is saturated with violence—or at least, the knowledge that danger may strike at any time. With Ben's remark of "It's enough to—," he seems about to repeat his earlier comment about the story making him want to puke. Repetitive, circuitous language/dialogue is another feature of absurdist theater. This passage also includes another reference to a mysterious "he." Ben's remark that "he" will contact Ben and Gus "any time" sheds light on what Ben and Gus are doing in this basement room in the first place—they're waiting for someone, possibly their boss, to contact them. This alerts the audience to the fact that Ben and Gus are under some unseen authority's control and so must answer to him. With this, the play shows that while Ben might be marginally more powerful than Gus, ultimately, they're in the same boat.

Gus tries to ask Ben a question again. This time, Ben lets him. Gus asks if Ben has noticed that it takes a long time for the lavatory tank to fill with water. Ben hasn't noticed. Gus wonders what's wrong with the tank. Ben suspects the ballcock is broken. Gus is intrigued; this has never occurred to him.

It adds a layer of absurdity and meaninglessness to the play that Gus should be so fixated on the lavatory's flushing mechanism. Still, the lavatory's broken condition alerts the audience to the condition of the building that Ben and Gus are waiting in—it's run-down, and nobody has bothered to fix any of its malfunctioning appliances.

Gus lies down on his bed and explains that he didn't sleep well last night because the bed and blanket were uncomfortable. Then Gus looks at a picture of cricketers hanging on the wall. "The First Eleven," he reads. Gus doesn't know what this means. Ben asks Gus about the tea again. Gus stands and walks around the room, calling it "a dump." The room would be better if it had a window—then they'd have a view.

Gus's complaint about the room being "a dump" further shows how lacking his and Ben's present accommodations are, though it's still unclear why they're in this room in the first place. It's also significant that the room is windowless: without a window, Gus and Ben are completely cut off from the happenings of the outside world; as such, they must rely on the mysterious "he" that Ben mentioned earlier for information about what's going on and what they must do.

Gus complains about his and Ben's job: they arrive in darkness, enter an unfamiliar room, sleep all day, do the job, then leave in the night. Ben thinks Gus shouldn't complain so much, since they typically only work once a week. But Gus doesn't like that they must wait around for hours in case they're called. Ben says that Gus needs to find some interests. Ben, for instance, likes woodworking and model boats and so is "never idle." He knows how to use his time wisely, *and* he's ready whenever they get a call. Gus asks if Ben gets sick of it. Ben asks what Gus is talking about, then he returns to reading his **paper**. They hear the lavatory flush.

Though Gus and Ben's exact profession remains unclear, Gus's complaints reveal what their working conditions are like. From Gus's remarks, the audience can discern that Gus and Ben deal with a lot of uncertainty and unpredictability in their line of work: they never work in the same place, and their surroundings are always unfamiliar to them. And even though they only work once a week, they're constantly on call, which suggests that their work consumes much of their life, and perhaps also that their boss doesn't have a lot of respect for Gus and Ben or for their time. Ben's suggestion that Gus would be less unhappy if he found a hobby and was thus "never idle," like Ben, suggests Ben's acceptance of their unideal working conditions. Finally, note that this time, Ben and Gus hear the lavatory flush. This implies that there's a functioning *lavatory somewhere in this building—but that Ben and Gus's boss, who presumably sent them here to do their job, didn't feel it necessary for them to have access to it. This further establishes that Ben and Gus are low on the food chain and that their superiors don't respect them all that much.*

Gus continues to praise the nice crockery and complain about how awful the room is. Then he asks Ben, who is by now thoroughly annoyed, why Ben stopped their car in the middle of the road that morning. It was dark and misty and Gus couldn't see anything, but he remembers that Ben was sitting up perfectly straight like he was "waiting for something." Ben denies this. He says he only stopped because they would've gotten here too early.

*Ben's behavior in the car is odd—and maybe even suspicious, given Ben's alarmed reaction when Gus asks him about it. Ben and Gus's curious interaction in this section also introduces the idea that not only are Ben and Gus not equal, but also that they might not have equal access to information regarding whatever job they're supposed to do tonight—that Ben, as Gus's superior, is privy to more insider information than Gus. Gus's observation that Ben seemed to be "waiting for something" in the car further supports this theory. It also alludes to the play's title—*The Dumb Waiter. *A dumbwaiter is an elevator-like platform that uses a pulley system to move items between floors of a building (usually food between the kitchen and the dining room). But this section suggests that "dumb waiter" also may be a play on words in the sense that quiet, waiting Ben is a literal "dumb waiter" (with "dumb" meaning unable or unwilling to speak).*

Gus pauses. Then he asks if Ben means that "someone had to get out before" they arrived here. Gus looks at his bed. Now it makes sense that his linens looked unwashed and slept in. Ben argues that Gus has no way of knowing if the sheets were clean when they arrived. Besides, he's slept in them all day—it could be Gus who made the sheets smell. Gus smells the sheets. He doesn't know what he smells like, but he supposes Ben could be right.

Gus's question to Ben about whether "someone had to get out before" adds to the play's mysterious and menacing atmosphere—it shows the audience just how uninformed Gus is (and possibly Ben, too) regarding who is involved in their job and who was (and is) in the building they're required to wait in to perform that job. That Ben and Gus may have been provided used, dirty linens is further evidence of their low rank and the lack of respect their superiors have for them. When Ben immediately rejects Gus's claim that they were given dirty linens, it further shows that he is far less interested in complaining about their working conditions or criticizing their superiors than Gus is.

Gus asks Ben where they are right now. Ben says they're in Birmingham. Gus is suddenly interested—Birmingham is the largest city in Great Britain. Plus, it's Saturday tomorrow: they can "go and watch the Villa." But Ben says it's an away game. Plus, they have to come back right away and don't have time to watch a game. "Things have tightened up," he tells Gus.

Gus thinks that being in Birmingham might afford them the chance to have some fun and see a football (soccer) game. When Ben shuts this down, explaining that "Things have tightened up," though, it suggests that their work no longer affords them the luxury of free time—as Gus has previously established, they're expected to be on call at virtually all hours of the day. This section reinforces the men's poor, exploitative working conditions.

Gus laughs and remembers a time he saw the Villa lose a tie-breaking game. He can't remember which team they lost to, though. He tells Ben that Ben was there, too, but Ben doesn't remember being there. He doesn't remember the disputed penalty, either, but when Gus describes the dispute, Ben insists that Gus is getting the details wrong. They continue to argue.

Gus and Ben's argument over the football game doesn't contribute to the play's "plot" (in so much as the play has a plot), but the banality and circuitousness of the argument further establishes the play's absurd tone. It makes whatever Ben and Gus's job is (which so far has only involved waiting around in a dingy basement) seem totally pointless.

Suddenly, an envelope slides underneath the right-side door. Gus stares at the envelope as Ben continues to talk about football. Gus points to the envelope. Ben doesn't know what it is. They both stare at the envelope. Ben orders Gus to pick it up. Gus does. The envelope is blank. Ben orders Gus to open it. Gus opens the envelope and finds 12 **matches** inside. Ben orders Gus to open the door and see if anyone's outside. Gus stares at Ben a moment, then he goes to his bed and takes a **revolver** out from under his pillow. He walks to the door, opens it, and peeks outside—but nobody's there. Gus shuts the door and places the revolver back underneath his pillow. They agree that the matches will be useful, anyway, since Gus is always running out of matches.

The envelope's appearance is a major turning point in the play: it's the first indication that there's a person (or people) outside the room monitoring Ben and Gus. Whoever delivered these matches has somehow learned that Ben and Gus need matches to make tea, and this implies that somebody is listening to them. This, in turn, adds to the play's threatening, dangerous tone. The revelation that Gus (and presumably Ben too) is armed is another key development; it presents another clue about their line of work while also contributing to the play's threatening atmosphere. It seems more likely now that Gus and Ben are involved in some kind of illegal activity—perhaps they are hitmen. Also note how Ben makes Gus go to the door to investigate, a further instance in which Ben uses his authority over Gus to protect his own interests—at the expense of Gus's safety. In other words, Ben's relative power doesn't make him merciful or kind—on the contrary, it makes him selfish and indifferent to the suffering of others.

Gus says he can make tea now that he has **matches**. Ben orders him to "light the kettle." Gus asks if Ben means he should light the gas. "Who does?" Ben asks Gus. "You do," Gus replies. Ben assesses Gus skeptically. Ben snaps that "light the kettle" is a common saying. But Gus hasn't heard of it. They argue back and forth and then stare at each other silently. Gus says that the expression Ben meant to say was "put on the kettle." But Ben claims he's never heard of that saying. Gus insists that "put on the kettle" is a common saying—his mother probably used to say it. Ben asks Gus when's the last time he saw his mother.

Ben and Gus's failure to communicate lends another element of absurdity to the play—absurdist plays (and Pinter's in particular) frequently portray the underlying meaninglessness and futility of the human condition through characters who use circuitous, nonsensical language. But Ben's insistence on using "light the kettle," a common saying, further suggests his conformist attitude—he believes that it's important to speak the idiomatic language of the masses. Because of this, he resents Gus for questioning the correctness of an idiom's meaning which everyone has accepted—even if the idiom's literal *meaning doesn't make sense. Finally, Ben's comment about Gus not having seen his mother in some time provides additional insight into Ben and Gus's job—it's apparently so time-consuming that they have little time even to see their families.*

Ben advises Gus to heed his advice. As "the senior partner," Ben is only trying to look out for Gus. But Gus refuses to let the kettle issue go. In response, Ben grips Gus's neck with both hands and shouts that the gas lights "THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!" Ben removes his hands from Gus's throat. Gus is silent, then he gives in and concedes that Ben is right. Ben asks why Gus hasn't lit the kettle yet. Gus strikes a **match** against the flattened matchbox, but it doesn't light. Ben stares silently as Gus strikes a match on his shoe; this time, the match lights. "Put on the bloody kettle," Ben orders Gus. Then, realizing what he's said, Ben slams his **paper** down on his bed and drops his head into his hands.

Ben explicitly confirms what the play has only hinted at thus far: he is "the senior partner," and Gus is his subordinate. Ben's suggestion that he's only looking out for Gus doesn't only apply to their ongoing kettle-semantics argument; it's a broader suggestion (and maybe even warning) that bad things may happen to Gus if he continues to challenge authority and scrutinize the agreed-upon way of doing or saying things—a case he drives home when he physically assaults Gus. Finally, note that Ben slips up and accidentally asks Gus to "Put on the bloody kettle," an expression he just finished telling Gus was incorrect. This suggests that Ben's learned manner of speaking and behaving is artificial, possibly an effort to appear more refined or knowledgeable than he really is.

Gus exits through the left door and returns moments later, announcing that the stove is "going." He wonders aloud "who it'll be tonight," then he announces that he's been meaning to ask Ben something. "Oh, for Christ's sake," Ben groans as he swings his legs onto his bed. Gus walks over and sits down on Ben's bed. Irritated, Ben asks Gus why he's always asking so many questions. He orders Gus to be quiet and do his job. But Gus repeats his question about "who it'll be tonight." Ben stares at Gus in confusion and asks if Gus is feeling okay. Gus says he's fine. Ben orders Gus to finish making the tea. Gus stands and exits silently through the left door.

Gus's question about "who it'll be tonight" hints at the nature of his and Ben's yet-undisclosed profession. They seem to be waiting for someone's arrival, so maybe this is the "who" to whom Gus refers. It's also apparent that Ben has no interest in answering Gus's question—though whether this is because Ben doesn't understand the question, doesn't know the answer, or knows and doesn't want to answer remains a mystery. Finally, the total lack of understanding that Ben and Gus achieve in this conversation adds to the play's absurdity: absurdist theater frequently uses communication breakdowns and nonsensical, ineffective language to illustrate human connection's—and by extension, life's—ultimate meaninglessness.

Gus returns moments later and announces that the stove has gone out because they're out of gas and have no money to feed the meter. Ben says they'll have to wait for Wilson. Gus counters that sometimes Wilson doesn't come by—sometimes he "just send[s] a message." Ben says they'll just have to have their tea later, then. He doesn't understand why Gus is so upset. Gus explains that he likes tea "before." Ben picks up his **revolver**, holds it up to the light, and begins to polish it. He tells Gus that Gus should "get ready anyway." Gus doesn't want to. He grumbles about not getting paid enough.

Wilson seems to be Gus and Ben's boss and the unnamed "he" that Ben referenced earlier. Gus and Ben's argument over Wilson's poor communication further establishes Ben as the obedient partner who respects authority and Gus as the rebellious partner who refuses to respect an authority figure who doesn't respect them back. This scene makes it clear that Gus is dissatisfied with the way Wilson runs things and thinks he deserves better working conditions. Ben, on the other hand, thinks that he and Gus have a responsibility to "get ready anyway" and do what Wilson asks of them, regardless of how he compensates them for their work. Finally, though Ben does end up polishing his revolver, his action of picking it up may also be read as a veiled threat against Gus—a warning that Ben has a revolver and has no qualms about using it on Gus if Gus continues to ask so many questions and criticize their boss.

Gus throws a tea packet into his bag. He thinks that Wilson should give them a shilling, at least, since "it's his place," and he should have made sure there would be enough gas to make tea. Ben guesses that Wilson only rents the place. Gus disagrees. It's the same thing everywhere they go: "You go to this address, there's a key there, there's a teapot, there's never a soul in sight." Then Gus wonders aloud whether the walls are soundproofed, since they never hear anyone, and nobody ever complains about them being too loud.

Gus doesn't seem to have an obvious reason to assume that the building he and Ben are in right now is Wilson's, but he does suggest that Wilson is wealthy enough to own property—which places him in a class above Ben and Gus, who seem to be underpaid members of the working class. If Wilson is wealthy, the audience may interpret Gus's criticisms against Wilson not only as a critique of authority but also of class. In light of this, when Gus complains that Wilson ought to at least provide them with enough gas to make tea, he's suggesting that Wilson's disregarding their comfort is even more egregious, given he has the means to provide them with adequate accommodations and simply chooses not to.

Gus grumbles about Wilson some more. He has lots of questions to ask Wilson but has a hard time knowing how. Changing the subject, Gus wonders aloud about "the last one[.]" Then he clarifies, explaining that he means "That girl." Gus asks Ben how many times he's read the **paper**. Ben accuses Gus of "criticising" him. He threatens to hit Gus if Gus doesn't cut it out. "Now look here, Ben—" Gus begins, trying to reason with Ben. But Ben angrily announces that he doesn't have to "look[] anywhere" he doesn't want to.

Gus's comments about "the last one" and a "girl" seem to allude to a previous job they performed. Given the seemingly illicit, secretive nature of their work and the fact that they're both armed, the audience might guess that Ben and Gus are hitmen. (This guide will assume that Ben and Gus are hitmen, though the play never explicitly states that this is so.) Ben and Gus's profession, then, adds to the play's violent, threatening atmosphere. It also makes Ben's apparent willingness to go along with whatever their bosses say all the more troubling, since it suggests that he's willing to obey authority even if an authority figure orders him to kill another person. Also note how Ben seems physically uncomfortable with Gus discussing what seems to be a previous hit, a detail that further suggests that, even though Ben follows orders to carry out hits, he's not necessarily okay with the things he's asked to do. Finally, Ben's anger at Gus for asking him to "look here" and see things from Gus's perspective shows just how determined Ben is to preserve the power imbalance between himself and Gus: he's effectively stating that he doesn't have to do or think anything Gus asks him to do because he's in charge and Gus isn't.

Ben and Gus are silent as they sit back down on their respective beds. Gus continues to discuss the girl. She wasn't all that pretty, Gus admits, but he still hates how much of "a mess" things became. Gus thinks that women are "A looser texture" than men. "Didn't she spread, eh?" he asks Ben. Ben sits up in his bed and squeezes his eyes shut tight. Then Gus wonders aloud who cleans up once they leave a job. Maybe, Gus speculates, nobody cleans up at all. Ben calls Gus a "mutt." Of course somebody cleans up after them—"They got departments for everything."

This scene adds further credence to the theory that Ben and Gus are hitmen—the "mess" that Gus describes here seems to refer to the gory aftermath of a hit. When he talks about how the woman "spread," he seems to be referencing the way her blood spilled out after they shot her, presumably with the revolvers they're armed with now. Why Gus remains fixated on the gory aftermath of this hit remains unclear, but it could be that he's troubled by the acts of violence that Ben and Gus commit as hitmen and so can't stop thinking and talking about past hits. Ben, by contrast, can only squeeze his eyes shut tight—perhaps symbolic of the way he must turn a blind eye to the brutal reality of their work in order to live with himself. Ben and Gus's opposite ways of coping with their job further establishes Gus as someone who questions everything and thinks for himself. Meanwhile, Ben believes it's important to always obey authority—and he refuses to think for himself and confront the brutal reality of their work because doing so would make it harder to obey authority. Finally, Ben's remark that their organization has "departments for everything" suggests its size, power, and reach—and Ben and Gus's relative lack thereof. Increasingly, the play asks the audience to see Ben and Gus as working-class everyman-type characters who are rendered powerless in the face of a much larger, nefarious institutional power.

Suddenly, a loud noise issues forth from the wall behind the beds—something is being lowered down from upstairs. The noise stops. The room is silent. Ben and Gus look at each other. Ben motions for Gus to approach the wall, and Gus does. He taps the wall with his **revolver** and finds that the wall is hollow. Gus puts the revolver down on his bed. Then he lifts a panel on the wall to discover a hidden serving-hatch—a **dumb waiter**. He pulls out a piece of paper and reads it aloud: "Two braised steak and chips. Two sago puddings. Two teas without sugar."

Finally, the titular "dumb waiter" appears. That the dumb waiter has started to deliver what seem to be restaurant orders to two hitmen adds another element of absurdity to the play. Additionally, it further solidifies Ben and Gus's status as lowly, working-class people who have no choice but to obey the wealthier, more powerful upper-class people who order them around. As far as the audience knows, Ben and Gus have no food, and it's already well established that they have no gas for the stove, either, making it impossible for them to fill the order the dumb waiter has sent them. This surely will create conflict for Ben, whose entire personality is rooted in upholding hierarchies and following orders.

The box on which the paper arrives ascends back up through the wall. Gus thinks it's funny that whoever is upstairs is in "such a hurry." Ben disagrees—there's nothing funny about any of this; cafés change ownership very quickly. Gus is surprised to learn that they're in a café. He wonders if the café's kitchen is downstairs, where they are. Ben says it is. He also says it's totally normal for cafés to switch hands. It happens all the time and isn't a big deal for the owners, who simply leave and move on with their lives. "WELL, WHO'S GOT IT NOW?" Gus asks. But before Ben can answer the question, the **dumb waiter** descends once more.

Gus acknowledges that his life and work are meaningless, and this allows him to see the absurd humor of his and Ben's present situation. Ben, meanwhile, believes that people need to obey their authority figures at all times, even if they don't understand or agree with what's asked of them—and also that failure to obey orders should be met with violence and punishment. Because of this, Ben treats his present situation as a serious problem, and maybe even a threat to his life. Finally, Gus's curiosity about who owns the café upstairs and inability to grasp the idea that cafés change hands all the time reflects his critical attitude toward social and class hierarchies. His lower-class status makes it difficult for him to grasp that anyone could be so wealthy that they could buy property and then leave it behind so casually. Ben's remark about it being normal for cafés to switch hands, meanwhile, suggests that he respects hierarchies. Also note how often Ben uses words like "common" or "normal" (as he does here)—this habit further suggests his conformist sensibilities. Ben is a big believer that people should go along with reigning systems, hierarchies, and social conventions—even if those accepted systems and behaviors act against a person's best interest.

Ben holds his **revolver** as Gus approaches the **dumb waiter** and draws out a piece of paper. He reads aloud, "Soup of the day. Liver and onions. Jam tart." Gus and Ben are silent. Ben looks at the hatch but doesn't look up. Gus places a hand on Ben's shoulder, but Ben swats it away. Gus approaches the hatch and looks up. Ben returns the revolver to his bed and announces that they must send something up. Gus agrees. They're happy to have agreed on a plan.

Again, this section demonstrates how Ben uses his relative power over Gus to protect himself at Gus's expense. That Ben holds his revolver as Gus approaches the dumb waiter shows that he feels threatened and yet afraid—and more importantly, that he has no qualms about putting Gus's life at risk to save his own. Next, the dumb waiter serves two main purposes. For starters, it adds another element of absurdity to the play, as it's unclear who is using it to send Ben and Gus meal orders, why they're sending them, and how they expect Ben and Gus—two hitmen who have neither food nor cooking supplies at their disposal—to make them. The dumb waiter also shows how relieved Ben (and even Gus) is to finally have explicit directions to follow. Though it seems implausible that they'll be able to fill the orders the dumb waiter has sent down to them, they find comfort, purpose, and certainty in having such a straightforward task assigned to them after hours of waiting in a windowless room with no communication from their boss. On the subject of their boss, Wilson—is it possible that he is the one sending these messages? And if so, why?

Ben asks Gus what Gus has in his bag. Gus approaches the hatch and shouts up it, "Wait a minute!" Ben yells at Gus to stop. Gus looks inside his bag and begins to remove its contents one item at a time, naming everything as he removes it: "Biscuits. A bar of chocolate. Half a pint of milk. […] Packet of tea." Ben asks if Gus has anything else inside the bag. Gus admits that he has one Eccles cake—he didn't bring a second cake for Ben because he figured Ben wouldn't want one. Ben tells Gus to send up the Eccles cake, too. Gus gets up to exit the left door, but then he stops and asks Ben if he can keep his Eccles cake if "they" don't know they have it. "That's not the point," Ben says.

Ben disapproves of Gus carelessly shouting up the hatch because he respects (and fears) authority and thinks that Gus's yelling will insult and anger whoever is up there. Ben's impulse to place Gus's cheap snack food on the dumb waiter—even though it's not what the order asks for—reinforces his need to adhere to accepted social convention. He feels it's better that they send something up, since the authority figures upstairs clearly expect them to. Finally, Ben's explanation that they still have to send up the Eccles cake (a type of pastry) even though the people upstairs don't know that they have it reinforces his unwavering obedience to authority. Ben is suggesting that a person has to obey authority at all times—not just in situations where they'll be caught if they don't. Ben's extreme obedience adds to the play's threatening atmosphere: even in situations where there's no obvious sign of danger, the mere threat of danger motivates Ben to act cautiously and obediently to avoid punishment.

Gus exits and returns with the plate. Ben looks inside Gus's bag and removes a packet of crisps. When Gus returns with the plate, Ben asks him about the crisps. He accuses Gus of "playing a dirty game." Gus says he only eats crisps with beer and was saving the crisps until he could find some beer. Ben orders Gus to put everything on the plate. They do so, but the **dumb waiter** goes up before they can put the plate on it.

Ben sees Gus's withholding the crisps (chips) from him as an affront to his power: he thinks that Gus is "playing a dirty game" in thinking that he can keep things from Ben, his superior.

Ben blames Gus for missing the **dumb waiter**. Gus asks what they're supposed to do now. Ben says they'll have to wait until the box returns. In the meantime, Gus should get ready. Gus puts on his tie and adjusts his holster. Then he pauses and asks Ben what's happening. He points out that this place can't be a café, since the stove only has three rings, and you can't cook with so few rings. Agitated, Ben explains that this is why the service is so slow here.

Ben blames Gus for missing the box—yet if Ben hadn't wasted so much time reprimanding Gus over the crisps, they may have had enough time to place everything in the box before it returned upstairs. Though both (or neither, really) are to blame for missing the box, Ben uses his power over Gus as an excuse to scapegoat Gus for his own mistakes. Also, if anyone is to blame in this situation, it's the people upstairs—Gus and Ben's higher-ups—for taking the box upstairs before Ben and Gus were ready. Ben's misplaced anger toward Gus thus metaphorically illustrates how exploitative hierarchies and working conditions pit working-class people against each other.

Just then, the **dumb waiter** descends. Gus approaches it and retrieves a piece of paper. He reads the paper aloud: "Macaroni Pastitsio. Ormitha Macarounada." Ben recognizes these as Greek dishes. Gus remarks that this is "pretty high class." Ben tells Gus to hurry and put the plate in the box before the box can ascend without it. Gus does so, shouting up the hatch: "Three McVitie and Price! One Lyons Red Label! One Smith's Crisps! One Eccles cake! One Fruit and Nut!" Ben hands Gus the milk, which Gus then places inside the hatch. "One bottle of milk!" Gus shouts up the hatch.

Ben claims to be familiar with this supposedly "Greek" dish that Gus has deemed "pretty high class" in order to seem more refined and more knowledgeable about fine dining than he really is—it's an attempt to distance himself from the working-class status of which he's so ashamed and to make Gus feel comparatively foolish, ignorant, and classless. But the only person Ben has made a fool of is himself, since Ormitha Macarounada is in fact a nonsense dish—it doesn't exist. The fact that the people upstairs have sent Ben and Gus an order for a nonexistent dish adds another element of absurdity to the play—absurdist theater frequently features characters faced with impossible, pointless tasks to emphasize the absurdity and futility of the human condition. The Ormitha Macarounada order also underscores the power imbalance between Ben and Gus and the authority figures upstairs—it suggests that they're messing with Ben and Gus and perhaps laughing at the thought of Ben and Gus struggling in vain.

Ben tells Gus he shouldn't shout this way, but at least they're done—for now, anyway. Ben tells Gus to get dressed, since they're bound to be called soon. Gus puts on his waistcoat, and Ben lies down in his bed. Gus complains about the place not having any tea or biscuits. Ben accuses Gus of "getting lazy" and "slack[ing] on [the] job." He gestures toward Gus's **gun** and points out that Gus hasn't even polished it. Gus tries to polish his revolver on his bedsheet.

When Ben urges Gus not to shout, it reinforces both his characteristic need to conform to social norms and his class anxiety—he doesn't want Gus to shout because Gus's shouting will alert the people upstairs to the fact that Ben and Gus are classless commoners ignorant of the refined etiquette of the civilized upper class. The same logic applies to Ben's order for Gus to polish his gun—Ben thinks an unpolished gun will make them appear slovenly and undeserving of their higher-ups' respect. Finally, Ben's insistence that they'll be called soon also reinforces his respect for authority—and also the way this respect makes him appear foolish. All their superiors have done thus far is tease and taunt them with matches they can't use and food orders they can't fill—yet Ben continues to have faith in them and wait dutifully for them to call him to act. At the beginning of the play, it seemed that Gus was the fool, but it's becoming increasingly clear that Ben's unwavering obedience to authority clouds his judgment and makes him behave foolishly, too. Meanwhile, Gus's constant scrutiny of their superiors seems increasingly prudent.

Gus wonders aloud where the cook could be. He also wonders if there are additional stoves and cooks somewhere else in the building. Ben replies that of course there are other stoves and cooks—it takes a lot of effort to make an Ormitha Macarounada. Gus places his **gun** in his holster. Then he anxiously wonders when they'll get out of here—isn't it about time that Wilson gets in touch with them? After all, they've "never let [Wilson] down."

Ben continues to be made the fool as he insinuates that Ormitha Macarounada—a dish that doesn't exist—is exceedingly difficult to make. Meanwhile, Gus's skepticism seems increasingly warranted. His observation that it makes no sense to have a café upstairs—but no real kitchen downstairs—reaffirms that something fishy is going on here. When Gus places his gun in his holster, it suggests that he believes he and Gus may even be in danger.

Gus grumbles about having a headache. Just then, the **dumb waiter** descends. The sound makes Ben jump up from his bed. Gus gets up, picks up the note, and reads it aloud: "One Bamboo Shoots, Water Chestnuts, and Chicken. One Char Siu and Beansprouts." Neither Ben nor Gus knows what to do with this latest list of demands. Gus looks at the box again and observes that they've sent back the tea packet, too. The returned tea bag alarms Ben. Gus suggests that it might not be tea-time. The box ascends.

In addition to highlighting the absurdity of Ben and Gus's situation, this section also reinforces their powerlessness: Ben and Gus lack the supplies and equipment necessary to send up even a simple meal—and they certainly can't send up the order of "One Bamboo Shoots, Water Chestnuts, and Chicken. One Char Siu and Beansprouts" the people are now asking them to make. Ben is alarmed because he simultaneously understands the grave importance of obeying authority—and also that his present circumstances leave him powerlessness to do so. Meanwhile, the fact that Ben is interpreting the returned teabag as a threatening coded message suggests not only his deference to authority but also that he is privy to information that Gus is not.

Ben returns to his bed. Urgently, he tells Gus that they had "better tell them" that they can't fill these orders because they don't have any food or equipment. He asks to borrow Gus's pencil so that they can send up a note. Gus turns to look for a pencil, but then he notices a speaking-tube hanging from the wall, beside the **dumb waiter**. Ben says they should have used the speaking-tube instead of shouting up the hatch. Ben points out the whistle next to the tube. He tells Gus to pull out the whistle and blow into it; the noise will let the people upstairs know that they want to talk.

This section marks a turning point in the play. Up until now, Ben and Gus haven't had the means to communicate directly with their superiors, but their discovery of the speaking-tube seems to offer a solution to this problem. Even so, the speaking-tube isn't an ideal form of communication: only one of them can use the speaking-tube at once. This means that one person must rely on the other to relay information to him, placing him in a position of relative ignorance—and powerlessness.

Gus blows into the whistle, but there's no sound. He shouts into the tube that they don't have anything. Ben grabs the tube from Gus, places it to his own mouth, and speaks into it with an apologetic tone, explaining to the people upstairs that they don't have any food left downstairs. Then he brings the tube to his ear and listens, alternatively placing the tube to his ear to listen and bringing it to his mouth to ask questions. In between speaking into the tube and listening, he explains to Gus that all the food they sent up was apparently stale or spoiled. Ben apologizes into the tube once more. Then he listens, promises to do something immediately, and places the tube back on the wall.

It's curious that only Ben gets a response from his and Gus's authorities when he uses the speaking-tube, and it suggests that Ben, as Gus's superior, is privy to info that Gus is not. It's also possible that something more nefarious is going on: are Ben and Gus working together to fulfill orders of their unseen higher-ups—or are the higher-ups and Ben scheming against Gus? Indeed, the higher-ups' dissatisfaction with Gus's food seems to suggest that Gus is the odd one out. This section also places the audience and Gus in the same boat, as neither can hear the voice on the other end of the speaking-tube, and so both must rely on Ben to tell them what the voice is saying—and must trust that Ben will be truthful about what he hears.

Suddenly excited, Ben says that the voice upstairs told him to light the kettle. Gus reminds Ben that they can't do this because they don't have any gas. Anxious once more, Ben wonders what they're supposed to do. "He wanted a cup of tea!" Ben explains. Gus scoffs. He (Gus) has been wanting tea all night; what about what he and Ben want? Ben sits on the bed and stares silently ahead. Meanwhile, Gus continues to complain that his and Ben's "sustenance" seems not to matter to anybody. Gus bets that "he" has plenty of food upstairs—that the people upstairs are doing just fine and probably aren't waiting around to see what he and Ben send upstairs. They're just messing with them.

The order from upstairs to "light the kettle" recalls the earlier scene in which he and Gus fought over which expression was correct: "light the kettle," "put on the kettle," or "light the gas." Ben is excited because the superiors have used his phrase and so confirmed its correctness. He also interprets this as proof of his relative acceptance among the upper classes. Gus sees through the charade, though: the people upstairs don't respect or accept Ben, and the fact that they've denied Ben and Gus basic "sustenance" and played games with them this entire time is evidence of their disrespect.

Ben interrupts Gus's grumbling. "Time's getting on," he notes in a quiet, wary voice. Gus says he can't work on an empty stomach. Exhausted, Ben tells Gus to just listen to him already. Gus relents and sits down beside Ben on Bed's bed. Then Ben gives Gus orders, and Gus repeats the orders back to Ben. If they receive a call, Gus is to stand behind the door. If someone knocks, Gus shouldn't answer the door. But nobody will knock on the door—they'll just come in. When this happens, Gus will shut the door behind the man without making his presence known to the man. The man will see Ben and walk toward him. Then Ben will take out his **gun**. The man will freeze. Then he'll turn around and see Gus.

Ben's comment that "Time's getting on" builds tension and adds to the play's menacing atmosphere—he's suggesting that it's nearly time to carry out the night's hit. Meanwhile, though Gus has repeatedly exhibited his preference to think for himself instead of blindly following orders, the ease with which he repeats instructions back to Ben suggests that he, too, finds it easier—and perhaps even comforting—to sit back and do what someone else tells him to do rather than act of his own volition.

Ben frowns just then. Gus observes that Ben has left out the step where Gus takes out his **gun**—and he's never left out this part before. Ben backtracks. Gus will take out his gun, Ben amends. The three of them will stare at one another, and the man won't know what to do. Gus asks what they should do if the person who opens the door is a girl. Ben says this wouldn't change anything.

Has Ben really "forgotten" the step where Gus draws his gun—or does he know that it's not part of the plan and accidentally alerted Gus to something Gus isn't supposed to know? Ben has warned Gus multiple times that it's in Gus's best interests to obey orders and not complain about their job or ask too many questions. If Ben didn't slip up, and Gus's being unarmed is really part of the plan for tonight's hit, it's possible that Ben hasn't been making empty threats—that Gus will actually pay for his disobedience and curiosity.

Gus stands up, shivering, and excuses himself. He exits through the left door. Ben stays sitting upright on his bed. There's the sound of the lavatory chain being pulled, but, once more, the lavatory fails to flush. Gus returns, looking deep in thought. He turns to Ben and asks, with fear in his voice, why "he" sent Gus and Ben **matches** if he knew they didn't have any gas. Ben stares back at Gus. Then he looks up.

When Gus questions why "he" (presumably Wilson) left them matches when he knows they have no gas to use them with, he's acknowledging that something fishy is going on— that perhaps his and Ben's fates are in the hands of powerful forces who do not have their best interests in mind and take pleasure in messing with them. That Ben and Gus should receive matches right after expressing a need for matches suggests two things: that Wilson is somehow surveilling them and listening in on their conversations, and that he is perfectly capable of giving them the supplies they need. Gus takes issue with Wilson's providing them with matches but no gas because it reaffirms his suspicion that Wilson is only messing with them: he never intended for Ben and Gus to use the matches and only provided them to remind Ben and Gus of their low status and powerlessness. The matches put Ben and Gus in their place, showing them that Wilson controls everything they do, even down to the banal act of making tea.

Gus asks Ben who's upstairs. Ben doesn't answer. Instead, he urgently grabs for his **paper** on his bed. Gus prods Ben to answer him, but Ben shouts, "Enough!" Ben orders Gus to be quiet, but Gus, irritated now, continues to ask about the place's owners. Ben gets up and strikes Gus on the shoulder. Gus remains unfazed. He says to Ben, "I told you who ran this place, didn't I?" Ben strikes Gus again.

Ben's irritation suggests that he does know something Gus doesn't know—and that Gus may be very close to finding out what this something is. It could also simply be Ben's effort to remind Gus of his place. Throughout the play, Ben's paper has symbolized his intelligence and refinement, particularly relative to Gus—and how Ben uses this superiority to exert power over Gus. When Ben grabs his paper here, he's reminding Gus that he (Ben) "r[u]n[s] this place," and Gus would be wise not to cross him. This section is also significant because it features one of the play's few moments of physical violence. Normally, the characters or stage directions merely hint at violence—as in the newspaper stories that Ben reads aloud or the veiled threats Ben makes against Gus. That Ben makes good on his threats here builds tension and reveals that Ben's obedience to authority isn't totally unfounded—that there are indeed real consequences for people who don't do as they're told.

There's a violent tone to Gus's voice as he asks why "he" is playing games with them when they've been put through so many "tests" and passed them all. Surely, they've shown that they're reliable and will always get the job done.

The "he" to whom Gus refers is presumably Wilson. That Gus can't even say Wilson's name out loud points metaphorically toward Gus's awareness of the distance that his and Wilson's power imbalance creates between them.

Gus's rant is interrupted by the **dumb waiter**, which comes down the shaft behind them. Gus goes to the dumb waiter and retrieves a note. "Scampi!" he reads aloud. Then he grabs the tube, blows into the whistle, and shouts into the tube, "WE'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" Alarmed, Ben calls Gus a "maniac" and grabs the tube from him. He warns Gus to stop and then hangs the tube back on the wall.

Where Ben and Gus direct their anger reveals a lot about their attitudes toward authority. Ben's alarmed, angry response to Gus's shouting reaffirms his obedience to—and fear of—authority; he's terrified that Gus will upset their superiors and get both of them in trouble. Meanwhile, Gus grows increasingly angry at their authorities, suggesting his unwillingness to show deference toward people who have done nothing but manipulate and exploit himself and his partner.

Ben lies down on his bed. He and Gus sit in silence. Then the **dumb waiter** ascends once more. After a pause, they hear the **dumb waiter** come down again. They look at each other. Then Ben picks up his **paper**. "Kaw!" he cries, then he describes the news stories like he did before. Gus lethargically tells Ben to continue, and they cycle through the same comments they made earlier. "It's unbelievable," Gus says. With disgust, Ben notes that the story is "enough to make you want to puke[.]"

The audience and Gus are in the same boat: neither can hear what the voice on the other end of the speaking-tube is saying and must rely on Ben for information. Gus's ignorance reinforces his relative powerlessness: his inability to speak directly with his superiors limits his ability to make informed decisions and possibly even puts his life in danger. This section also adds to the play's absurdity. Ben and Gus's present conversation is nearly identical to their conversation at the start of the play, and this reinforces the absurd futility of their situation: they've spent the entire play trying to meet their superiors' increasingly unreasonable demands, yet in the end, they're right back where they started, and all their work was for nothing.

Ben gets up and adjusts the **revolver** in his holster. Gus gets up and announces that he's going to grab a glass of water. He leaves through the left door. Then the whistle in the speaking-tube sounds. Ben gets up, takes the speaking-tube down from the wall, and places it to his ear. He listens and tells the voice that they're "ready." Ben places the speaking-tube back on the wall. Then, his voice urgent, he cries out for Gus. The right door opens. Ben turns, his revolver pointed at the door. Gus walks inside. His clothes have been taken from him, and his holster and revolver are gone, too. He stops, his arms at his sides, and stares at Ben. Ben stares back.

When Gus enters the room through the right-hand door—the door the target is supposed to walk through—he reveals himself to be the target. It's left ambiguous whether Ben has known this to be the case the entire time, or whether he's only learning about it now. Either way, that Ben must now betray his partner illustrates how exploitative working conditions and hierarchies pit workers against each other. The play's closing scene also sheds new light on the play's title, revealing that Ben and Gus have both been "dumb waiters" all along. Gus has dumbly waited around for hours, utterly ignorant of the fact that he has a target on his back. Meanwhile, Ben has been a "dumb" (as in mute) waiter too: he has spent the entirety of the play waiting for his boss to tell him what to do, unwilling to speak out against his higher-ups and question his exploitative working conditions. Up to this point, Ben has blindly obeyed authority, seeming to believe that doing so will present him with the opportunity to improve his social standing and quality of life. This final scene shows the grave consequences of Ben's unquestioning obedience—it has incentivized him to betray his partner. Not only this, but it's not even clear if killing Gus will improve Ben's standing at all, or if he'll continue to be exploited and undermined by more powerful forces who know that his lower-class status leaves him with no choice but to do as they say, even if that means harming himself and others. Finally, that both Gus, the rebel nonconformist, and Ben, the obedient follower, should meet such grim fates reinforces the play's underlying position that life is absurd and meaningless. People are doomed to fail, regardless of whether they think for themselves or seek reassurance in upholding the status quo.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Charles, Carly. "*The Dumb Waiter.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 11 Nov 2022. Web. 11 Nov 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Charles, Carly. "*The Dumb Waiter.*" LitCharts LLC, November 11, 2022. Retrieved November 11, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-dumb-waiter.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Dumb Waiter* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Pinter, Harold. The Dumb Waiter. Grove Press. 1994.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Pinter, Harold. The Dumb Waiter. New York: Grove Press. 1994.