

Beckett's Comic Silence in the Plays of Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard

Wham, bam, thank you Sam.
Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers*

The enigmatic silences in Samuel Beckett's plays, like their descendants, the forceful Pinter pauses, have undergone much interpretation. Scholars, directors, actors, and audiences puzzle over the question of what these masterful minimalists say when they say nothing. Beckett's silences draw us into a void beyond linguistic expression. Harold Pinter's pauses express the characters' struggles to obtain or to hold on to power. By contrast, the silences in the plays of Tom Stoppard have received little critical attention. This is not really surprising, given that this playwright's fame rests upon his verbal excesses, rather than upon any tendency to restrain them. Yet Stoppard's much explored Beckett legacy extends beyond a shared penchant for bawdy humor, puns, and dizzying non sequitur. While both Beckett's and Pinter's silences, and the uncomfortable laughter that often accompanies them, express these playwrights' pessimism, (1) Stoppard's silences help to construct the more optimistic world view expressed in his plays.

Samuel Beckett's plays produce laughter when the silences extend far beyond the audience's comfort zone. The opening of *Endgame*, for example, shows Clov alone, exploring his barren environment. Beckett's stage directions note Clov's "brief laughs" as he climbs his ladder, looks out the window, uncovers the ashbins, and prepares for another meaningless day. Clov's laughter expresses grim confirmation that nothing has changed since yesterday. His laughter also raises mysteries. The audience asks themselves what Clov sees out the window and what or who lurks beneath the sheets and the bloodstained handkerchief. As we witness Clov's laughter, it begins to bring us into his world. Ruby Cohn notes "Beckett's laughter is a mask for, not a release from, despair" (297). Beckett's silences draw

us into a place we don't want to go, yet feel we belong, and we respond to this recognition with uncomfortable laughter.

Martin Esslin and others tell us that Beckett's plays have freed contemporary playwrights from the limits of nineteenth-century realism. **(2)** Characters are no longer defined by careful exposition or clear motivation. Instead, fragmented dialogue raises more questions than it answers. Sets look unfamiliar, more like minimalist nightmares than inviting parlors. Finally, plots abandon conflicts neatly resolved in favor of meandering randomness. A loss of faith in the efficacy of language permeates Beckett's plays and, in part, defines the Theater of the Absurd. Alice Benston shows how Beckett's silences contribute to this sense of the disintegration of language. In Beckett's non-linear world, one speech does not motivate the next (Benston 115). Sometimes, this takes the form of comic non-sequitur:

Hamm: Why don't you kill me?

Clov: I don't know the combination to the cupboard.

(Pause)

Hamm: Go and get two bicycle tires. *(Endgame 8)*

One may speculate that, perhaps, Clov could find something that he might use to kill Hamm, if he did have the combination to the cupboard. Similarly, Hamm's reference to bicycle tires might recall Clov's unfulfilled desire for a bicycle; nonetheless, one cannot grasp an absolutely logical thread to follow here. The audience laughs, not so much because of the characters' lack of traditional motivation as out of the recognition of the absurdity of their expecting logical motivation to prove readily apparent in human behavior.

Thus, Beckett's comedy leads to a subtle, yet complex self-reflexive theater. Some of the play's loudest laughs come from the acknowledgement of the shared frustration of

audience and character. For Benston, Beckett's characters "struggle in the silence to face the challenge of the need to speak" (116). Clov wallows in despair as he admits that the seeds he has planted will never grow. He moans "They'll never sprout!" (*Endgame* 13). A pause follows until Hamm observes, bluntly, "This is not much fun" (*Endgame* 13). This understatement is followed by another pause that slowly fills with laughter as the audience recognizes the self-reflexive edge in Hamm's complaint. Here, Hamm has nearly broken the fourth wall, and the pause allows this to sink in. Beckett takes this device a bit further, directly acknowledging the audience, when Clov turns his telescope out and looks at them:

Clov: "I see . . . a multitude . . . in transports . . . of joy."

(Pause)

That's what I call a magnifier.

(He lowers his telescope, turns toward Hamm.)

Well? Don't we laugh? *(Endgame 79)*

Once again, Beckett emphasizes the self-reflexive moment. The audience does not remain outside the line of fire of Clov's sarcasm, and his use of "we" here implicitly includes everyone in the theater. Beckett's pauses contribute as much to the humor in *Endgame* as do his use of non-sequitur, ironic understatement, or exaggeration. This effect comes down to more than simple comedic timing. As Benston explores in detail, silence in Beckett's plays can be filled with either pathos or laughter (Benston 115). Traditional comic timing tends to distance the observer from the alienated target. **(3)** Beckett's comedy in these examples thrives instead on identification with the hopelessly alienated subjects of Beckett's existential nightmare.

If Beckett's comic silences lead to identification with figures trying to locate themselves in a wasteland, then the comic silences in Harold Pinter's plays lead to a different kind of identification. Pinter's sets look like ordinary run-down residences, leading the audience to expect a conventional domestic drama, yet the action and dialogue resist all attempts at naturalization. Nowhere can this discrepancy between sets and language be better demonstrated than in *The Homecoming*, where uneasy laughter arises from the unexpected outcomes of the struggles for power between the characters (Innes 281, Benston 124). Pinter establishes the pecking order in *The Homecoming*'s all male family group throughout Act I. In verbal struggles for dominance, Max, the patriarch, has defeated both his brother, Sam and his youngest son, Joey. Then Max himself, in turn, faces defeat by his older son, Lenny. At this point the long lost oldest son, Teddy, arrives with his seemingly demure wife, Ruth, and leaves her alone to encounter the sinister Lenny in the dimly lit living room. After having seen Lenny thoroughly trounce Max, audiences expect to see Ruth intimidated by Lenny. On the contrary, Lenny's spontaneous narrative describing his bullying and contemplation of the murder of "a certain lady" seems to intrigue Ruth. She asks Lenny a question, which disarms him; he regroups, and after a brief pause, launches another campaign of intimidation. Pinter repeats this pattern three times, and Lenny struggles to make each subsequent tale more menacing (*The Homecoming* 46-9). Ruth remains nonplussed, and Lenny makes a more aggressive move when he says he will take away her glass (*The Homecoming* 49). Ruth's calm questions demonstrate that, inexplicably, she understands the ongoing game of intimidation that constitutes his family dynamic, and she does not intend to allow him to take this particular trick. (4) The audience perceives the family "game" and Ruth's victory as well, even though none of this information has been communicated directly through

language. Pinter's drama, like Beckett's, initiates us into a world that we don't particularly want to enter, yet once we find ourselves there, we laugh at the uncanny sense of recognition.

As the audience and Lenny himself realize that Ruth cannot be bullied, we laugh at Lenny's amazement when Ruth challenges him in the ambiguous "glass of water" scene:

Lenny: Just give me the glass.

Ruth: No

(Pause)

Lenny: I'll take it, then.

Ruth: If you take the glass . . . I'll take you.

(Pause)

Lenny: How about me taking the glass without you taking me?

Ruth: Why don't I just take you?

(Pause)

Lenny: You're joking. (*The Homecoming* 50)

Audiences laugh as the tension builds during these pauses. We don't laugh at anything we would normally view as a joke, however. In spite of Lenny's accusation, Ruth clearly is not joking. Ruth takes quite seriously her refusal to be cowed by Lenny, and nothing about this scene resembles any kind of traditional joke. Rather than presenting a taboo impulse couched in acceptable terms and released in a cathartic punch line, in accordance with Freud's analysis of the function of a joke, **(5)** the "taking" referred to here is overt. Although the scene reaches its peak without ever clarifying exactly what this "taking" consists of, we know that it involves power. As the scene continues, Ruth shifts Lenny from the offensive to the defensive posture. When she invites him to drink from her glass as he sits in her lap or

lies on the floor, she infantilizes him. She leaves, and the mystified and agitated Lenny shouts after her “What was that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal?” (51). After Ruth’s departure, another silence follows, and Max, Lenny’s father, enters from upstairs in his nightcap, like Wee Willie Winkie, demanding an explanation for the racket. Lenny’s response, “I was thinking aloud” (51) elicits another laugh because he is at once absurd and oddly accurate in his play with notions of silence made eloquent. The “thinking aloud” of this family has become a noisy, shared, dynamic event, never explained, yet instinctively and expertly mastered (or mistressed) by Ruth, and then by the audience.

Pinter’s plays, like Beckett’s, imply skepticism about the power of language to express reality (Brown 23). Many of Pinter’s critics explore the role of silence in the menacing tone of his plays, but suggest that Pinter’s silences signal not so much a failure of language as a refusal to use language to communicate (see Esslin 238-9 and Benston 116–17). Ruth and Lenny, like all of the characters in *The Homecoming*, do indeed evade direct communication. Furthermore, Pinter’s script defies all attempts to explicate it by theorizing about the family history. The silences in *The Homecoming* relate to the self-conscious construction of character (Benston 119). Characters in *The Homecoming* create fantasy lives for themselves and others because, in spite of the fact that they are living in a house rather than a barren wasteland, their assumptions about the world closely resemble those of Beckett’s characters: there is no “true” identity, history, or meaning, but only that which they construct for themselves.

Tom Stoppard’s plays may seem at first to have little place in this discussion. Yet Stoppard, in spite of his verbal showiness and well-known love of language, also plays with words and silence, and, like Beckett, sometimes says more with his silences than with all his

clever dialogue. Michael Hinden asserts that “Stoppard’s entire career has been an effort to absorb and work through Beckett” (*After Beckett* 404). The closing line of Stoppard’s *Jumpers*, “Wham, bam, thank you Sam,” suggests an irreverent nod to Beckett, with a hint of dismissal. George Moore, the play’s philosophy professor protagonist, struggles with the possibility of certainty, the existence of God, and other existential concepts. The play’s final speech reverses the emphasis of Beckett’s plays (Innes 326). Moore’s belief in God, in spite of compelling evidence to the contrary, challenges existentialism with a paradoxically firm assertion: “There are many things I know which are not verifiable but nobody can tell me I don’t know them” (76). This dubious, yet oddly persuasive position persists throughout Stoppard’s work. Later in *Jumpers*, Archie, a dandy who is also the lover of George’s wife, the eponymous Dotty, gives a speech that parodies *Waiting for Godot*. Archie comforts George as he grieves the untimely demise of Thumper, his beloved pet rabbit. “Do not despair” says Archie “Many are happy much of the time; more eat than starve, more are healthy than sick . . .” (87). Thus begins a lengthy litany that amounts to looking at the glass as half full. Further analysis of Stoppard’s other plays, however, reveals a somewhat more complex response to existential questions.

Stoppard’s earliest play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, shows Beckett’s influence the most directly. The play turns *Hamlet* inside out, revealing the familiar story from the point of view of two minor characters. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves hanging around between scenes in a barren space that may be the wings of a theater, but strongly suggests the wasteland of *Waiting for Godot*. However, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern resemble Vladimir and Estragon, Stoppard has given them something Vladimir and Estragon lack, namely, a context. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

possess only the vague traces of a past that they can scarcely remember. Because they are a part of *Hamlet*, however, the audience knows more than they themselves do about how they fit into the events around them. We also know that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are doomed, so while their deaths lack meaning for them, these deaths become vibrantly infused with meaning for the audience. Stoppard forces us to see the tragedy in the absurd deaths of two flunkies, and transforms them into tragic heroes.

In this play, more than any of his others, Stoppard makes significant use of silences. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern alert us to the importance of silence by frequently calling attention to its presence, and sometimes to its absence. “Not even a pause?” wonders Guildenstern, hoping for an acknowledgement of the strangeness of their situation (14). In the opening scene, pauses, heavy with portent, punctuate the endless-run-of-heads coin toss, placing the play outside the laws of probability. When Hamlet delivers his most famous soliloquy in silence, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern look on, debating whether to corner him and demand an explanation for the puzzling events they have witnessed. The silence reveals how Stoppard takes the play beyond Godot. Here, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern consider whether or not to take matters into their own hands. Although the pauses taken by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, like those of Vladimir and Estragon, often indicate confusion, a joke fallen flat, or overwhelming inertia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern consider resisting the fate to which Vladimir and Estragon resign themselves. Sadly (and comically) they ultimately choose not to resist it, but Stoppard suggests that they could have chosen differently.

This suggestion begins at the beginning of the play by establishing a reality that may differ fundamentally from the one inhabited by Vladimir and Estragon. In search of an

explanation for the coin's coming up heads eighty-nine times, Guildenstern, the more curious of the two, explores four possibilities: that he has "somehow willed it", that time has "stopped dead", "divine intervention", or, the last possibility, "a spectacular vindication of the principle that each individual coin spun individually is as likely to come down heads as tails and should cause no surprise each individual time it does" (16). Guildenstern dismisses the second proposed explanation (that time has stopped dead) as "on the whole, doubtful" (16), and Innes argues that this dismissal amounts to a rejection of a Beckettian scenario, as all the other possible explanations express non-existential views (330). Indeed, Guildenstern's third alternative suggests the possibility of God, and the first suggests the power of individual choice. These possibilities continue to emerge throughout the play and steer the play outside a strictly existential worldview.

The possibility of individual choice arises as Stoppard parodies the scenes in *Endgame* where Beckett's characters use direct address. Rosencrantz shouts "Fire" at the audience, who sit in expectant silence until Rosencrantz explains that he's "demonstrating the misuse of free speech, to prove it exists" (60). Rosencrantz looks contemptuously at the audience through a long pause as they sort this out, then says in disgust "Not a move. They should burn to death in their seats" (60). Another silence follows as the audience processes the characters' freedom to shout at them, and their own failure to respond to what was, fortunately, a false alarm. This scene compares to Clov's direct address in *Endgame* discussed earlier, although Rosencrantz's approach constitutes more of an assault. Guildenstern, after a long look into the audience, suggests that he and Alfred, the actor, might simply leave together and "create dramatic precedent" (32). At this moment, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern acknowledge wider possibilities. While Clov draws us into his

bleak world on the stage, Guildenstern considers abandoning that world in the faint hope of finding something better. Later, after Rosencrantz and Guildenstern read the letter which tells them of their fate, Guildenstern equates death with silence when he argues with the Player. He tells the Player “But no one gets up after death – there is no applause -- there is only silence . . .” (123). As soon as Guildenstern finishes, the Player performs a convincing death, and then leaps up; his point being that phony deaths are the kind people do believe in. Guildenstern again insists upon the reality and the finality of death, but Stoppard’s signature ambushes have left us uncertain. The end of the play leaves us contemplating the pairs’ fate as a mystery, rather than a trap. Guildenstern asserts in his closing line, “There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said – no. But somehow we missed it” (125) and Rosencrantz adds, “Well, we’ll know better next time” (126). Does this amount to vacuous cheerfulness, or a more forceful note of optimism? While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, like Didi and Gogo, talk about leaving but never actually do so, Stoppard leaves us with the suspicion that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern certainly could have left. In *Waiting for Godot*, as in *Endgame*, there is clearly nowhere else to go. Through his use of comic self-reflexive techniques, silences among them, Stoppard leaves us asking whether our choices do count for something, and whether death will turn out to be yet another false alarm (6).

Stoppard’s more recent play, *Arcadia*, considered by many to be his best to date, takes up these same concerns. Two English academics study letters and journals in order to learn about the seventeenth-century inhabitants of an English country house. The action bounces back and forth between the present and the past, so that the audience can witness the seventeenth-century events, as well as the twentieth-century academics who conduct research

in hopes of piecing these events together. Like George Moore in *Jumpers*, both Bernard Nightingale and Hannah Jarvis experience flashes of certainty before they have any evidence to support their theories. While Bernard's theory turns out to be completely off the mark, Hannah's comes much closer to matching the events in the lives of the seventeenth-century characters as we know them to have occurred. This plotline reflects *Arcadia*'s overarching theme of the resilience of knowledge. In the seventeenth century, Septimus' speech to his brilliant pupil Thomasina also addresses this theme. Septimus reassures Thomasina, who feels devastated upon learning about the plays and poems lost in the burning of the library at Alexandria (38). Septimus tells Thomasina to think of the surviving work, a reworking of the "think of the glass as half full" moment at the end of *Jumpers*. Here, *Arcadia* picks up where both *Jumpers* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* leave off. Septimus' speech hints at the survival of something beyond knowledge:

Seven plays from Aeschylus, seven from Sophocles, *nineteen* from Euripides, my lady. You should no more grieve for the rest than from a buckle lost from your first shoe, or for your lesson book which will be lost when you are old. We shed as we pick up, like travelers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind. The procession is very long and life is very short. We die on the march. But there is nothing outside the march so nothing can be lost to it. (38)

Valentine, a member of the later generation of Thomasina's family, and like her, a mathematician, confirms both Thomasina's prophetic mathematical speculations about heat degradation and iterated algorithms, and, indirectly, Septimus' more metaphysical observations about the recovery of knowledge. Valentine finishes with his computer what

Thomasina began with her pencil by extending her equations and confirming her theory. When Valentine explains heat degradation to Hannah, just as Thomasina has explained it to Septimus, both Hannah and Septimus realize the implication that the universe will eventually cool down to a Beckettian wasteland. Echoing Rosencrantz's faith in the "next time", however, Valentine adds "But if this is how it started, perhaps it's how the next one will come" (78).

Stoppard uses silences in *Arcadia* to mark the shifts between the past and the present, and one character mysteriously inhabits both times and links them. Gus, the mute genius of the twentieth-century Coverley family, and Augustus, Thomasina's younger brother in the seventeenth century, seem at first to be two distinct characters, in spite of the fact that they are played by the same actor, a young teenage boy. When Gus appears on stage dressed in a seventeenth-century costume, because the twentieth-century family has been planning a fancy dress ball, the distinction between the two becomes blurred. Gus and Augustus conveniently wear the same costume throughout the play's final scenes, the only times that Augustus appears on stage. While this device serves to create the kind of double take in which Stoppard delights, it also serves to deepen *Arcadia's* sense of mystery. Gus silently presents Hannah with the drawing of Septimus done by Thomasina, which confirms her most important theory. Gus may have found the drawing in the family library, but in a previous scene, Septimus himself has given the drawing to Augustus. The device approaches breaking the frame of the play, and Stoppard teases us with the possibility of some magical connection between the past and present. Septimus's line as he comes to understand Thomasina's theory expresses the existential view "When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone on an empty shore" but Thomasina counters "Then we will dance"

(94). Thomasina, like George Moore and Hannah, intuits a deep order to things, and Valentine's iterated algorithms offer a mathematical demonstration of this: "In an ocean of ashes, islands of order. Patterns making themselves out of nothing" (76).

In the last scene of *Arcadia*, as Hannah and Gus (or is it Augustus?) join Thomasina and Septimus in their waltz, they orbit one another unseen. Stoppard's silence gives his final word. We know that Thomasina will die in a fire, yet this moment hints at a further persistence of life. Traditionally comedy ends with a wedding dance celebrating a life-affirming fertility; Stoppard's waltz promises instead an immortality of ideas. Meaning and possibility hover around us, and we comprehend this meaning in fragments, much like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to comprehend the meaning of *Hamlet*. Though most critics stress the pessimism and bleakness of Beckett's view, Harold Hobson says in a well-known review of *Endgame* that the play leaves the discerning viewer with "a profound and sullen and paradoxical joy" (15). The silence at the end of *Arcadia* finds magic in the midst of loss, and expresses this paradoxical joy, Stoppard's legacy from Beckett. The plays of both Pinter and Stoppard incorporate Beckett's silences to bring this "paradoxical joy" to their audiences.

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Notes

1. See Christopher Innes' *Modern British Drama 1890-1990*, p. 279 for a discussion of the fundamental pessimism which Pinter shares with Beckett.
2. See in particular Ruby Cohn's *Casebook on Waiting for Godot* and Innes, p. 427.
3. Henri Bergson's classic definition of the comic as an instance of something mechanical encrusted upon something living portrays the comic experience as one of being distanced from the comic target. Here I refer to Bergson's *Laughter*, excerpted in Corrigan, p. 331.
4. Indeed, if, as seems to be the case in this family, scoring a victory consists of provoking one's opponent to a state of emotional arousal, then Ruth never loses one of these mini-battles throughout the course of the play.
5. Freud describes the function and the anatomy of jokes in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, excerpted in Corrigan.
6. For further discussion of the influence of *Waiting for Godot* on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and the ways in which Stoppard's play differs from Beckett's, see Sammels pp.107-8, Cahn, pp. 36-42, and Kelly pp. 74-81.