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Concept of Time in Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*

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Abstract

In most of his works, Pinter makes an exploration of memory; what is real and what is imaginary fuse together in his plays. Also Pinter has always made his characters use the gaps in their memory to their advantage. His works very often show his preoccupation with the elusive nature of human memory. However, from the late 1960s through the 1980s, Pinter composed a series of plays which focussed tenaciously on the overwhelming ambiguous nature of human memory. This particular era in the oeuvre of Pinter's work is regarded by critics as the memory plays of Harold Pinter. The plays which come under this category include both masterpieces and some of his lesser known works. These are – Landscape (1968), Silence (1969), Night (1969), Old Times (1971), No Man's Land (1975), The Proust Screenplay (1977), Betrayal (1978), Family Voices (1981), Victoria Station (1982), and A Kind of Alaska (1982).

Regarded as one of his masterpieces, Betrayal is a study of human relationships and human behaviour. Though the emphasis is on the memory and the importance of the past in a person's life, the play's reverse order of sequences brings an added quotient to it. This article strives to study the concept of time and relationships as used by Pinter in the play. The researcher has made a new-historicist study of the theme of human relationships and how its form changes with the change of time in the article.

The period of time between the late 1960s to the 1980s, finds Harold Pinter delving deep into the realms of memory and focussing on the power the past has upon his characters. The series of plays he wrote during this period, which later became famous as Pinter's Memory Plays deal with the complex and obscure enigmas of memory. The plays that fall under this category include plays like *Landscape* (1968), *Silence* (1969), *Night* (1969), *Old Times* (1971), *No Man's Land*

(1975), *The Proust Screenplay* (1977), *Betrayal* (1978), *Family Voices* (1981), *Victoria Station* (1982), *A Kind of Alaska* (1982). Though some of Pinter's later plays also build upon the same theme, there are differences in their tone and subject matter that separates them from the category of Memory plays.

Betrayal is one of the better known memory plays of Pinter. Here, though the focus is on memory, the relation between time and memory is made significant by

the playwright's ploy of using an anachronological sequence of events in the play. This play has often been considered to be based on the relationship Harold Pinter had with BBC television presenter Joan Bake well (later Dame Joan Bake well) between 1962 and 1969. Considered to be one of his masterpieces, *Betrayal* tells the story of Jerry and Robert, two lifelong friends, who are rivals both in the publishing world and also for the love of Robert's wife, Emma. Jerry (who is married to Judith), and Emma carry on their affair in secret until Emma admits her infidelity, but continues the affair. The classic dramatic scenario of the love triangle is manifest in this engaging character play, a meditation on the themes of marital infidelity, duplicity and self deception. The dramatic structure of the play is complicated by the scenes' anachronological order. The action begins at the end, with Jerry and Emma meeting two years after their affair has ended, as Emma's marriage with Robert is breaking up. From this point, the play regresses in time. *Betrayal* was first produced by the National Theatre in London on 15 November 1978. The original cast featured Penelope Wilton as Emma, Michael Gambon as Jerry, Daniel Massey as Robert, and Artro Morris as the waiter. It was designed by John Bury and directed by Peter Hall. The play has been revived numerous by various directors over the years. Pinter adapted *Betrayal* as a screenplay for the 1983 film directed by David Jones, starring Jeremy Irons (Jerry), Ben Kingsley (Robert), and Patricia Hodge (Emma).

Betrayal involves three characters in a romantic tangle. In his presentation of this romantic triangle, Pinter's interested is manifested not so much in the love affair as in the subsequent betrayal. He shifts the focus from the love affair to the betrayal of the old love, from romanticism to disillusionment. The romantic triangle is obviously a stereotyped theme, but Pinter's variation on the theme makes it

highly innovative. Despite its subject-matter, this is not an erotic play. The relationship between Emma and Jerry is basically a game with an elaborate system of rules set up by both sides. These are especially necessary as there is in fact a double system of relations between them, as clandestine lovers and as, respectively, wife and best friend of Robert. Therefore, there are both external rules, about how to keep it secret, and internal rules, about what is permitted within. Even after the affair is over, Jerry corrects Emma when she asks about his son: "You remember the form. I ask about your husband, you ask about my wife".

The society and literary field in the late 1960s and 1970s were highly influenced by the 'mod' culture that was revived in the later decades of the century as well. The people of the time became more comfortable in talking about taboo themes like sex and relationships out loud. Books discussing sex such as *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask)* became popular and authors started to take advantage of the lifted censorship laws on literature in the sixties. In such a situation, the play *Betrayal* with its stress on extra marital affairs and tangled relationships seems to be very apt. Also, with the publication and wide popularity of Eric Segal's *Love Story*, romance as a genre became very prevalent among the reading public. Also a lot of experimentation on the sexually offensive subject matter made its way into the literature of the time. Pinter makes use of the genre with a big twist by adding the elements of menace in a love story. Again, by this time, discussion of homosexuality became more open and its understanding in the society also evolved to a greater degree. Though homosexuality has been a theme in literature from age old times, the 1970s saw a number of texts with explicit gay themes and characters. In this age of better understanding of the gay people, Pinter's *Betrayal* with its hint of a relation between Robert and Jerry does not seem

out of place. From the new historicist point of view, a view point which basically puts stress on the environment in which the text is located, we can see that Pinter's use of the theme is highly praiseworthy and efficient. Again, the 1960s and 1970s saw an accelerated growth in women's empowerment. Women of these times began to get more and more independent and career oriented. In this scenario, the presentation of the characters of Emma and Judith who are both independent career women is also very commendable. "The whole society here depicted - literary and artistic London - is thus shown as an inextricable network of adulteries and betrayals....Yet at the same time, these sexual relationships are shown, by Pinter, to be superficial in the extreme; far from being passionate involvements, elemental and irresistible, they seem casual and trivial,...a form of amusement that will pass the time and alleviate the boredom of an affluent and meaningless existence." (Esslin,214). In the 1970s when art and literature was the lifeline of the city, the use of literature as a means of sustenance for Robert and Jerry also demand commendation.

"All the other plays, written both before and after *Betrayal*, show the past as being either an obscure area which the characters take pains to seal off (with differing degrees of success) or a group of memories to be recreated according to will. In *Betrayal*, the past is played out before us. The reverse sequence which periodically stops to run forward for a scene or two, brings us to the end of the play to the beginning of the affair between Jerry and Emma." (Regal, 109).The unexpected reversal of the normal mode of progression of the plot in *Betrayal* takes us back from the dissolution of both the love affair and the marriage in 1977 to Jerry's opening maneuver of the betrayal, in Robert and Emma's bedroom, in 1968. We have only glimpses from the history of their relationship - from their first kiss to a chilly, awkward last drink - and so the

challenge is to keep the story compelling as it unravels backwards. It is through this reverse structure that ideas, motivations, and deep layers of characters' behaviours and multiple meanings of actions are determined. The structure of Pinter's drama does not follow conventions of classics, and such elements like time and language are new and different in the drama. Every scene in the play is clearly dated, and the characters grow visibly younger from scene to scene. The possibility of suspense is ruled out, as the outcome is already known. Nevertheless, every new scene turns out to be unexpected because, although we know the outcome, we don't know what the steps that led up to it were. What makes this play unique in Pinter's oeuvre is clearly its reversed time sequence. The backward progress which amplifies the notion that memory is degraded by time, allows Pinter to reveal carefully scripted, fragmented pictures of the affair rather than to present a linear forward action in time. "Betrayal is somewhat cinematic in nature, since the scenes that do not succeed each other chronologically assume the nature of flashbacks...Unlike his other plays, wherein time past is discussed, *Betrayal* dramatizes it." (Dukore, 107)

At first sight, it seems clear that the title *Betrayal* refers to Emma's being unfaithful to her husband Robert with Jerry. But an examination of the play reveals that all its characters, and not just Emma, are guilty of betrayal. The network of relations is so minutely crafted that: each betrayer in his turn, becomes the betrayed. With Emma, Jerry betrays his best friend, her husband; likewise, Jerry is hurt by what he sees as his betrayal by Robert, who did not disclose to him his knowledge that Jerry and Emma were having an affair. Emma herself has been unfaithful not only to her husband but also to her lover: this is revealed when she tells him she has become pregnant while he was away and that the father is Robert. Emma feels betrayed by both men because of the close

friendship between them, which irritates her. She feels excluded by their relationship and tries to disrupt their games of squash and their bachelor lunches. Her anxiety is set in perspective when Robert says he should perhaps have had an affair with Jerry himself, implying a homosexual attraction for him. Sakellaridou, commenting on the play says, “The conventional erotic triangle reappears in the later play in a reversed form; the same jealousies and battle for possession are re-enacted, only emotion is filtered, almost silenced, as Pinter deprives his characters of the evocative process of memory and proceeds to a clinical reproduction of the past.” (Sakellaridis, 179).

“*Betrayal* thus centers on the complex web of betrayals and lies in the relationship of three people who are passionately attached to each other. It is a theme that runs through Pinter’s *oeuvre* from its very beginning ... Yet the three central characters whom we see on stage in the play are not the only betrayers, not the only victims of betrayal in the play: Casey, the writer whom Jerry has discovered and whom Robert is publishing so successfully hovers, unseen, in the background of the relationship between Emma and Jerry....And there is Jerry’s wife, Judith, whom Jerry is betraying with Emma; whom Emma has been observing at Fortnum’s with a mysterious lady about whom Jerry knew nothing and who has been telling Jerry about that fellow-doctor who admires her and who takes her out for what she assures Jerry are purely platonic drinks....The whole society here depicted - literary and artistic London - is thus shown as an inextricable network of adulteries and betrayals....Yet at the same time, these sexual relationships are shown, by Pinter, to be superficial in the extreme; far from being passionate involvements, elemental and irresistible, they seem casual and trivial,...a form of amusement that

will pass the time and alleviate the boredom of an effluent and meaningless existence.” (Esslin, 212-214).

It is often said that Harold Pinter’s understanding of the past is as complex as a memory itself. In his play *Betrayal* Pinter explores our relationship to the past through the classic dramatic scenario of the love triangle. Built on the themes of marital infidelity, duplicity and self-deception, Pinter simultaneously glorifies and debases love. This memory play uses the distortion of time to reveal how each character is emotionally isolated by their actions of deceit and self-gratification. Considered Pinter’s masterwork, *Betrayal* uses this love triangle to create moments of awkward and strained encounters and brutal silence that get below the surface of social propriety and to the depths of human interaction. The exchanges between the three characters are nearly always awkward, strained encounters in which each character cloaks honesty with social pretense. In order to cover the silences with acceptable repartee, Emma, Robert, and Jerry engage in utterly ridiculous conversations.

Betrayal is a richly textured drama that exposes social pretence and unmitigated emotions that draws us into the same complex world we all inherit and makes us believe simultaneously in the endurance and transience of relationships and in the ecstasy and pain of intimacy. Dukore continues the discussion and says that “In *Betrayal* the backward movement, dramatic not narrative, is toward disillusion; the audience, having witnessed the end of the affair and its aftermath, understands how transitory are the lovers’ feelings towards each other during the early time of the affair. The forward movement, more intermittent, is toward such revelations as how the husband deals with his friend after he has discovered his wife’s infidelity with him.” (Dukore, 107)

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