

Harold Pinter's *Old Times*: A Memory Play

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Harold Pinter may easily be considered the most challenging contemporary British dramatist. Bulk part of the literary circle emphasis Pinter as an absurdist, but the other part of Pinter's writing remains untouched. It is difficult to measure Pinter's payment to modern drama, but it is very clear that he revolutionized the theatrical understanding. Pinter's mastery of the word, of peeling down the English language to its most necessary and influential mechanism has been recognized by all his contemporary writers. His mobile, perceptive confrontation of some of the darkest themes of modern existence has hardly ever been matched to anyone. *The Old Times* is a stunning piece by the Nobel Laureate Harold Pinter, narrating the element of time, space and the related concept of memory of the dim distant past, which was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre in London on June 1, 1971.

My aim through this article is to propagate that Pinter has shown the power of the past and memory in this play. His famous plays *Old Times*, *No Man's Land* and *Betrayal* all center on loves past and present, where when memory pressures to invalidate past well-being it may demolish present happiness to the characters. In these plays, we see that characters oppose about their memories, disagree with themselves, remembering events one way and then forgetting it ever happened; memory becomes a weapon. The past plays a very energetic role in the relationships of the characters as well as the action of the present situation. As in the other of Pinter's Memory plays, memory is a weapon used by *Old Times*' characters to gain control and dominate their opponent's characters.

In this play the character's preferences to control can demolish relationships on various levels: the characters' personal world, the world of the audience, and the world beyond the audience.

[To] Pinter human beings are simply inscrutable, to themselves as well as to others. They may be emptiness surrounded by illusion, but they may also, without knowing it, possess a solid center of reality. The point is that they do not know and are too frightened to find out...(1975. p. 385-8)

The supremacy of Pinter's theme of memory maintains even in the play *Old Times*. In *Old Times* Pinter presents three people, a husband and wife, Deeley and Kate and a friend of Kate's Anna, who is now revisiting her old friend after an interval of twenty years. In this play we can see that one woman and man fighting for another woman. Deeley and her friend Anna fight for getting the favours of Kate. The relationship of Kate and her husband is not cordial and convivial and does not prove to be fertile. Eventually it is Kate who achieves control over herself, as well as, the other two characters. At the end of the play Kate denotes that she has won this round, because Anna and Delley have both done the mocking efforts to control her. The

theatrical concern of this play centers upon the disparities between various accounts of actions, which are supposed to have happened twenty years in the past.

Anna's opening speech reminds memories of the time that she shared with Kate:

Anna: Queuing all night, the rain, do you remember? My goodness, the Albert Hall, Covent Garden, what did we eat? To look back, half the night, to do things we loved, we were young then of course, but what stamina, and to work in the morning, and to a concert or the opera, or the ballet, that night, you haven't forgotten? ...

[That world,] does it still exist I wonder? Do you know? Can you tell me?

Deeley: We rarely get to London.

(Kate stands, goes to a small table and pours coffee from a pot.)

Kate: Yes, I remember. (*Old Times*, 46)

The contest between Anna and Deeley for Kate's attention has begun. Pinter mentions the lesbian relationship throughout the play and we can see the perfect epitome of this when Anna tells Deeley:

You have a wonderful casserole . . .

I mean wife. So sorry. A wonderful wife. (*Old Times*, 46)

Pinter distinguishes that the past is basically dramatics when explored through conflicting memories both because the choice of possible action is further extended and because the uncertainty of outcome holds the audience in continuous suspense. There are so many dialogues spoken by Kate who have indicated the illicit relationship of Anna and Kate. The statement casserole becomes the symbol of bisexuality:

Kate: Yes, I quite like those kinds of things, doing it.

Anna: What kind of things?

Kate: Oh, You know that sort of things.

Deeley: Do you mean cooking?

Kate: All that things. (*Old Times*, 48)

Harold Pinter tries to mark their past relationships. Here, all the characters think over the past, truly or not, and the audience is unlikely to know who is telling the truthful past and who is not.

As Pinter observes:

I suggest there can be no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false (1986, p. 11).

Deeley faces a lot of struggle to penetrate the circumference of her defensive sovereignty. In the play Deeley has recognized himself with the movie title *Odd Man Out*. Nevertheless Deeley continues to fight throughout the play. The film *Odd Man Out* provides an interesting point in *Old Times*. While the film is not the play's stimulation, the title alone recommends a wealth of possibilities to its purpose. *Odd Man Out* plays an interesting part as Deeley and Anna use the film and its characters' stories to redesign their pasts and present with Kate. Pinter enjoys negation, and *Old Times* is built on exact, shared memories that seem to contradict. The past determines present behavior and events, and the characters who make and remake the past find

themselves “re-living” the past in the present situations. Because of the theatrical impact of *Old Times* which is due to the expectation in trying to get at what really happened in the past and what sort of relationship existed between Anna, Kate and Deeley. Pinter articulates his views:

We don't carry labels on our chests, and even though they are continually fixed to us by others, they convince nobody. The desire for verification of the part of all of us, with regard to our own experience and the experience of others is understandable but cannot always be satisfied (1986, p. 11).

The memories in Pinter's Plays are marked for an unconventional outlook on life and things. His women characters are constantly prepared to fight for equivalent authority with men. Pinter's characters can alter their memories in response to the necessities of their differences in the present.

The tales remembered by the characters, one by Deeley and another by Anna, are of prime importance in creating the threat of the past transparently. These memories project the sharp angle of menace that has caused Kate to restrain her memories of her old and only friend, Anna. The information accruing from these memories suggests overtly that Anna and Kate have had a lesbian relation between them in the past. The dialogue connecting Anna at many points in the play clues at this lesbian relationship:

Kate: I'll think about it in the bath.

Anna: Shall I run your bath for you?

Kate: No I'll run it myself tonight. (*Old Times*, 56)

We see that Kate wins in the last round and she also maintains control over both Deeley and Anna because all of the action revolves around Kate in the play. Through these memories of the characters' memories, as they fake or accurately recount the events, the original experience, the memory, and the reality in which they are currently living all become part of their memory as Anna speaks:

There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place. (*Old Times*, 39)

There are many interpretations that can be applied to this play as Harold Pinter's says about *Old Times*:

It happens, It all happens.

In *Old Times* Pinter shows his total capability in similar to human reality with that creative effort to capture the given moment and set it above the doubts which time brings all the way through its channel. The play *Old Times* is basically a sequence of dialogue between three characters, Anna, Kate, Deeley, who from a clear love triangle try to show the other character belittle. Their conversation, woven typically around the episode of the past, attempts to define the nature of the relationship which existed and steadily came to stay in between them.

Anna: Why don't you try her yourself?

Deeley: Would you recommend that?

Anna: You'd do it properly.

Deeley: In her bath towel?

Anna: How out?

Deeley: How out?

Anna: How could you dry her out? Out of her bath towel?

Deeley: I don.t know.

Anna: Well, dry her yourself, in her bath towel.

(Pause) (*Old Times*, pp. 50-51)

In this play we see that both Kate and Anna have played a powerful role in comparison to the character of Delley. Pinter uses a variety of techniques in the play both to depict the fight between Deeley and Anna, and to denote the bias of memory in the play. Pinter shows memory, can operate on a variety of levels and that memory becomes someone else's reality.

All the three characters Anna, Kate, and Deeley play the memory game, the strength of memory's power is ever present, whether there is fact to their asserts and games, or not.

Almansi and Henderson appropriately comment:

the characters in *Old Times* enter a sort of time-machine..

(1983,91).

Pinter's play explores the subject of memory and its relation to reality. The past is so important that very little seems to happen in the present, the relationship between the three characters after in time with their conflicting and changeable memories of the past. Lowe opines (2006):

Anna is reconstructing the past by reminiscing about the past episodes of her living together with Kate in London as working girls decades ago. By doing so she provokes Kate to remember things, to dig up the memories of Kate's past from oblivion. The tension is well discerned and implies that the menace of the past is to run its course through the action of the play, and that by stirring the skeletons in the cupboard Anna shall exercise considerable influence over the present..

Pinter's most of the plays present the women assume the position of authority, dominance, freedom and control towards the end of the play. Harold Pinter provides the message in his plays that no male should undermine women and the new woman is now to stay and men have to come to stipulations with this new reality of life. The characters become completely overwhelmed in their "memories" and at some point completely misplace the past and the battle for dominance in the present.

Deeley and Kate, and the triangle of the characters thus formed gives out an immediate representative meaning therefore the past exists in the present through memory, and past is capable of exercising conspicuous and possible impact on the present as Almansi and Henserson rightly point out:

has the effect of diachronic time, since, from the outset, past and present are both manifest on the stage simultaneously, though with a different status (light versus dark; centre of the room versus windows; foreground versus background).. (1983, p. 86).

The play *Old Times* attempts to capture the past, to co-relate eternal time with the effect of the past on the present through memory lane. Their conversations relate to the past of all the three characters, and are broken up by comprehensive stories which in their turn transmit again to the past with reference to space in time.

Gale observes that. . .

In *Old Times* Pinter has given us the dramatization of the famous opening lines of T.S. Eliot *Four Quarters*: Time present and time past... (1977, p. 188).

In *Old Times* Pinter demonstrates that a play in its broadest description is a personal and straight notion of life of characters. Its value is greater or lesser in accordance with the concentration of the impressions of the persons. Harold Pinter knows that physical presentation expresses internal clashes and decision. He uses a theatre language capable of carrying forward these sense impressions.

The past is no longer within accomplished and it has vanished into eternity forever, only the recollections remain. Memories are said to be the authentic account of past happenings. Memories, more often than not, redefine the past—man has undergone various stages of alteration along with the unalterable passages of time. In *Old Times* the dialogue is covered in a firm and stable monologist framework. The play is established through oral connections between all the three characters that the reality of the past fades, and memory transforms real events into shadowy leftovers of slight experience. So the characters do not like to come out of the confusion of the past, as it happens in *Old Times*. Through conversations and memories their histories and behaviors are exposed, but it seems unlikely that everything we hear is harmonious, precise, and accurate because the account of the memory presented by the characters are full with contradictions, struggles and conflicts in their relationships. The frequent question which strikes in audiences mind is to whose memories are actually true and precise. We see there is an added expectation of how each one of the character is going to respond when the lanes of memory appear to cross. However the question, what really happened in the past, does not concern in present.

The play, essentially about memory and past impressions and how elusive and self serving they can be, brings together three people with their own perceptions, but forced somehow to acknowledge their interdependence. *Old Times* is one of Mr. Pinter's most satisfying memory plays, with the careful combustion of its language and moments of almost deranged humor.

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