

Ambiguity and Enigmas of the Past on the Pinterian Stage

Harold Pinter is one of those prominent modern dramatists who greatly endorsed the multifarious objectives of the mid-20th-century modern theatre that Martin Esslin termed as “The Theatre of the Absurd” and played a major part in its construction. The Nobel Prize-winning British playwright was strongly influenced by the works of Samuel Beckett, Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka. His theatrical inventions, such as the long pauses, colloquial language use and spatial minimalism became known as “Pinteresque”, have been widely subjected to scholarly criticism. The subject matter of his plays can hardly be condensed into a single expression, yet some critics designated his works as “comedies of menace”. Pinter did not entirely agree with this label, since even he could not accurately define the subject matter of the plays, neither the characters’ motives, past lives or actions. The ambiguous information that he offers through dialogues and by retelling previously heard stories from a character’s past is not meant to confuse the reader, but rather to make him or her construct a personal perspective about what should be regarded as true or uncertain. The past, that characters claim to have happened, cannot be entirely reliable. More often than not, their memory deceives them, and the audience too, therefore the past remains a conundrum even after the performance. Pinter’s inclination to discuss and examine how one’s memory works in reflection of present and past times, stems from his encounter with Marcel Proust’s most well-known work, *Remembrance of Things Past/In Search of Lost Time*. In the early 1970s, *The Proust Screenplay*, which was Pinter’s adaptation of the monumental novel, was eventually unfilmed, but it also gives evidence to the fact that his “encounter with Proust encouraged [his] ‘experiments with time and memory, and to drive him further away from a narrow representational realism.’”¹

William Empson points out in one of his most prominent books, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, that “‘ambiguity’ itself can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things have been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings.”² Pinter does not tell the audience what to believe and does not try to turn them toward one ultimate truth either, since in his dramas, there is no ultimate truth that could be securely declared. Therefore, more often than not, the viewers are confused after a Pinter performance because Pinter leaves them in the auditorium with uncertainty, since both the character’s past and the outcome of the plays remain hidden

¹ William Baker, *Harold Pinter*, (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 84.

² William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, (London: Penguin Books, 1995) p.24.

and undefined. However, the unknown answers are to be explored in the viewers themselves, as “[they] will not merely have acquired information about a rather curious group of people; [they] will have found out something crucial about [themselves].”³

The aim of the present paper is to examine two major plays of Pinter, *Old Times* (1972) and *Betrayal* (1978), as regards their treatment of the characters’ ambiguous pasts, veiled emotions, hidden fears and dreams in their partnerships. Of especial importance will be the inspection of memory in these specific dramas; how remembrance connects and disconnects the individuals’ past and present. Besides this analysis, another crucial focus of the study will be the applicability of the postmodern notion of ambiguity, according to which the underlying semantic meaning of words and expressions should be scrutinised at length. This will help arrive at the conclusion that Pinter’s language, owing to its flexibility and plasticity is open to multiple interpretations both at a textual level and in a non-literal sense as well. It can be safely proclaimed that nothing – in the ontological sense of the word – can be taken for granted or considered reliable in these absurd dramas, and the reader gradually loses his or her certainties by the end of the plays. Yet, the constant fear and doubts in relationships depicted in these particular plays, give account of the justification of chaos, which is very much present in quotidian human emotions as well.

“Poets have always wanted to write plays and playwrights have been haunted by the feeling that their dramas would be better if they were poetic.”⁴ Bamber Gascoigne further argues that dramas need to be more elevated in style than prose; however, poetic drama should not necessarily echo the Shakespearean iambic pentameter form that so many people try to emulate.⁵ There were various attempts to establish an innovative and yet traditional dramatic language for the modern theatrical stage but some poets’ endeavours, like Yeats’, did not seem to be quite pertinent for the theatre. T. S. Eliot was one of the pioneers who brought back the ordinary language into the prosaic form, and who later succeeded “to use modern poetry as the language of the drama.”⁶

Some decades later, a new generation of playwrights emerged, whose perplexing subject matter was not the only factor that greatly defined the mid-20th century drama, but also whose language use became one of the most distinguishing trademarks of modern theatre. Harold Pinter is among those outstanding playwrights who were able to compose poetic drama. “He constructs with precision. [A]s a dramatist he [...] works like a poet,

³Arthur Ganz, “Pinter, a Collection of Critical Essays”, ed. Arthur Ganz in *Twentieth Century Views*, (New Jersey: A Spectrum Book, 1972), page 2.

⁴ Bamber Gascoigne, *Twentieth Century Drama*, (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1962), p. 59.

⁵ Gascoigne, *Twentieth Century Drama*, p. 59.

⁶ Gascoigne, *Twentieth Century Drama*, p. 61.

because his text is as considered as a poet's."⁷ Indisputably, it is not accidental, since Pinter started his writing career as a poet. If the dramatic text is regarded as poetic, then clearly, the work must operate as a poem as well. Undoubtedly, one of the pivotal essences of poetry is metaphor, which is very much present in all Pinter dramas. In his works, words, utterances and even non-verbal signs always contain some hidden meanings that the reader has to decipher. According to Peter Hall, director of several Pinter plays and founder of the Royal Shakespeare Company, "Pinter's stage is a metaphor"⁸. Every single moment stands for something unspeakable; this is the reason why the use of pauses also bears such a great significance on the Pinterian stage.

He often declared that he did not choose to create abstract images for the basis of his plays, rather he wished to "start writing a play from an image of a situation."⁹ What is more, the generic Pinterian situations always stem from a real live situation, personal experiences that he developed further into a play. Michael Billington claims that "everything – as so often in later years – began with an image that was secreted in the memory, acquired dramatic resonance and gradually evolved into a play."¹⁰ In this aspect, Pinter appears to be concrete, his characters find themselves in quotidian situations, moreover their location is every time specifically defined. Pinter's setting is down to earth; however, through the plot it becomes known that the characters' motives cannot be specifically defined because the scenery is always endowed with a certain secret or mystery. Furthermore, the characters feel a desperate need for a private, isolated space in order to "dominate and take or keep possession"¹¹. Later productions, like *Old Times* and *Betrayal*, characters do not necessarily fight for an isolated shelter but rather for a possession of a third character. In both cases, the target of their desire is a female figure, an enigmatic woman.

Martin Esslin, the Hungarian-born English critic and professor of drama is well-known for coining the term, "The Theatre of the Absurd". It stems from his 1961 book, carrying the same title, which is still regarded as one of the most momentous books about modern theatre. In his seminal work he considered authors like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter as major constructors of the absurdist tradition. Harold Pinter's highly respected stage director, Peter Hall finds this categorisation misleading concerning Pinter: "The absurdist [...] sought to illuminate by incongruous juxtapositions or

⁷ Peter Hall, "Directing the Plays of Harold Pinter", ed. Peter Raby, in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 162.

⁸ Hall, "Directing the Plays of Harold Pinter", p. 169.

⁹ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, (London: Methuen drama, 2001), page 242.

¹⁰ Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 66.

¹¹ Bill Naismith, *Harold Pinter*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 4.

improbable shocks – which were usually justified by a grain of truth. But Pinter in comparison has always been the truth itself.”¹² However, what is certainly true for Pinter is that “the Theatre of the Absurd merely communicates one poet’s most intimate and personal intuition of the human situation, his own *sense of being*, his individual vision of the world.”¹³ This kind of theatre genuinely reflects the author’s inner world and therefore, it is deemed to be the writer’s theatre in the first place rather than the director’s. In Esslin’s view, language in general “appears more and more as being in contradiction to reality”¹⁴ which applies to the language of the Theatre of the Absurd, as well as psychology and psychoanalysis.

Sigmund Freud’s commonly known theory about the workings of the human mind, according to which “everything mental as being in the first instance unconscious; the further quality of ‘consciousness’ might also be present, or again it might be absent”¹⁵, serves the basis of the assumption that “the subconscious has a higher content of reality than the conscious utterance.”¹⁶ Most declarations of Pinter’s characters are no exception in this respect, either. Their assertion – more often than not – is, indeed, in contradiction to reality. They never exactly reveal what they want to communicate or rather what they do not want to communicate. This is the source of ambiguity that constantly pervades Pinter’s plays: hidden emotions and intentions are expressed in a seemingly simplistic verbal speech; references to the characters’ past, as well as to their present are persistently hazy. The dominant theme of the Pinterian theatre is the fight for possession, room, space and in love triangles, the competition for a partner.¹⁷

At the age of fourteen, Pinter was caught writing a poem in the middle of the night by his father, who finally did not send him to bed, but gave him confidence to carry on composing.¹⁸ This is where his inclination for writing derives from, and also – as he very often mentioned in the interviews – from “an image that took obstinate root in his memory”¹⁹. His 1949 prose poem, *Kullus* depicts these problems, which later became the persistent recurring themes of the Pinterian canon. “Here are Pinter’s continual preoccupations: ambiguity, shifting human relationships; the conflict for power and control of others, of space, of a room.”²⁰

¹² Hall, “Directing the Plays of Harold Pinter”, p. 160.

¹³ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 402.

¹⁴ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 407.

¹⁵ Pamela Thurschwell, *Sigmund Freud, 2nd Edition*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 4.

¹⁶ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 408.

¹⁷ Baker, *Harold Pinter*, p.27.

¹⁸ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 15.

¹⁹ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 75.

²⁰ Baker, *Harold Pinter*, p.27.

This characterisation provides the seminal base for all of his earlier plays; moreover, it can be safely proclaimed that these dramas authentically follow the absurdist tradition. However, later works, like the first full-length play after *The Homecoming*, *Old Times* as well as *Betrayal* enclose all of these features, yet in a more realistic and quotidian setting. Character's utterances are still vague and their motives are to gain power but in the latter plays and also in Pinter's later works, the viewer is more capable of identifying with the individual's plight and intentions.

As Pinter often pointed out in interviews: "life is an endless battle for positions."²¹ Invariably, in his 1972 play, *Old Times* there are distinct authorities who try to dominate and take over positions too. Here however, the dominating forces are not meant to be understood as an allegory of political control, as in *The Birthday Party*, but as a "contest between two figures for the soul and body of a third, and [...] the ultimate unpossessability of the triumphant heroine."²² This setting depicts how human relationships operate and how "[characters] create the past as a weapon of psychological domination."²³ Austin Quigley also highlights the difference between the first and later stages of Pinter's writing career: "even as [Pinter] begins to argue in the 1980s that many of his earlier plays were, indeed, political, he exempts from this claim *Landscape*, *Silence*, *Old Times* and *Betrayal*."²⁴

Menace and violence are other major themes that constantly reappear on Pinter's stage; *Old Times* follows this pattern as well, yet in a different manner as in his former dramas. "His latest works, *Landscape*, *Silence*, *Night*, and *Old Times*, are even more internalized, as he demonstrates that memory of the past can affect the needs and perceptions of the present, and vice versa, although the menace element has undergone a transformation by now. This is because he has become more concerned with the interior individual as opposed to the exterior masks."²⁵

Pinter conceives of violence something that is imbedded in the world; therefore, it comes naturally for him to include them in his writings: "The world is a pretty violent place, it's as simple as that, so any violence in the plays comes out quite naturally. It seems to me an essential and inevitable factor."²⁶

²¹ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 193.

²² Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 211.

²³ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 206.

²⁴ Austin Quigley, "Pinter, Politics and Postmodernism (I)" ed. Peter Raby, in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 8.

²⁵ Steven H. Gale, review "The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter" by Martin Esslin, (Chicago: Chicago Review, 1973) p. 179.

²⁶ Laurence M. Bensky, "Harold Pinter: An Interview", ed. Arthur Ganz in *Twentieth Century Views*, (New Jersey: A Spectrum Book, 1972) p. 29.

Violence is usually manifested in verbal acts rather than in physical ones. Words can hurt as deeply as deeds, sometimes even more. The same applies to the effect of silences comparing to speech, as Pinter once exposed: “I think that we communicate only too well in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is continual evasion.”²⁷ In addition to Pinter’s view, August Strindberg’s main character of *The Ghost Sonata*, Hummel says: “Silence cannot hide anything – which more than you can say for words.”²⁸ It is simply because of the fact that “words are no longer capable of holding together the intricacies of meaning that are being evolved”.²⁹

The play opens with the following enigmatic description: “*Light dim. Three figures discerned. [...] Silence.*” There is no dialogue yet, the characters have not uttered a word, still there is a keen sense of crisis generated by the extended silence, which, according to Peter Hall, “is a longer still. [...] Often a character emerges from the Silence with his attitude completely changed.”³⁰ At this point, however, the audience does not even know any of the characters, so they cannot relate a transformation in his stance, but what is certainly perceptible is the moment of tension. No words are needed to demonstrate the strain and the unexplainable menace that gradually permeates the stage. The audience cannot really resolve the presence of the third person whose shadowy figure is also extant from the beginning along with the other two characters, yet it does not latch on to Deeley’s and Kate’s conversation up to a relatively long point.

The couple’s dialogue starts dubious too, after Kate’s reflection to the dim room, Deeley raises an importunate enquiry – regarding Anna’s look, as the audience later learns –: “Fat or thin? **KATE:** Fuller than me. I think. *Pause.*”³¹ Peter Hall defines the Pause as “a threat, a moment of non-verbal tension.”³²

Between the consecutive question-answers, the extent of non-verbal tension increases. Deeley is anxiously inquiring about his wife’s ostensibly concealed past. Nonetheless, the majority of his queries alludes to Kate’s feelings how she looks back at her relationship with Anna: “**DEELEY:** Do you think of her as your best friend? [...] **KATE:** She was my only friend. **DEELEY:** Your best and only. **KATE:** My one and only. *Pause.* If you have only one

²⁷ Naismith, *Harold Pinter*, p. 12.

²⁸ quoted in Ronald Knowles: “Pinter and the Twentieth Century Drama”, ed. Peter Raby, in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.80.

²⁹ Richard Allen Cave, “Body Language in Pinter’s Plays”, ed. Peter Raby, in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.138.

³⁰ Hall, “Directing the Plays of Harold Pinter”, p. 163.

³¹ Harold Pinter, *Old Times*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).p. 245.

³² Hall, “Directing the Plays of Harold Pinter”, p. 163.

of something you can't say it's the best of anything."³³ Funny as it may seem, after twenty years of marriage, Deeley seemingly did not even know up to this point about the existence of the person, who played a rather significant role in his wife's youth, which may suggest he does not know anything about Kate's former life whatsoever.

Enoch Brater says in connection with *Betrayal*, yet it pertains to any Pinter plays, that: "one can verify that something happened but what precisely happens is unsaid."³⁴ Therefore, it is not a surprise that Deeley does not know the rather relevant fact that his wife once shared her flat and supposedly, even her bed with Anna before him. He keeps asking his suspicious questions forlornly until the moment when Anna's murky shape, as well as existence visibly materializes. Deeley's questions seem to prove the fact that he is completely unaware of his wife's past. These questions also disclose the value of his and Kate's marriage. Outwardly, as a husband he could never be as close to his spouse as Anna, her one and only friend. Twenty years might have passed without even seeing each other, yet Anna and Kate's special and shady bond appears to be stronger than any kind of matrimony. For this reason, the tension is evident from the very beginning; Deeley suspects something even before Anna's actual emergence. This awkward situation is unavoidable; nevertheless, he cannot deny his most intense feeling towards the subject, that is his jealousy: "(Smiling.) She was incomparable."³⁵ A few lines later he says: "[...] I shall be very interested. **KATE:** In what? **DEELEY:** In you. I'll be watching you."³⁶ He wants to see Kate's reactions how she behaves in Anna's presence, even if he knows very well that there is something veiled about the women's relationship.

What is more, his ambiguous questions reveal that he might know Anna from the past too. When he asks Kate why she chose Anna as her friend, it sounds like he could precisely identify the person who he is asking about: "Why her?"³⁷ Moreover, his reaction to Kate's query, why she should be watched by him, he replies: "To see if she's the same person."³⁸ Obviously, he associates this person with someone whom he once met. This assumption is verifiable when he pronounces: "She may be a vegetarian."³⁹, along with Kate's later confirmation, referring back to his statement: "You said she was a vegetarian."⁴⁰

³³ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 247.

³⁴ Alice Rayner, "Harold Pinter: Narrative and Presence", (*Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4: The John Hopkins University Press, Dec., 1988), p. 484.

³⁵ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 247.

³⁶ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 249.

³⁷ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 247.

³⁸ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 250.

³⁹ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 250.

⁴⁰ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 252.

Some moments later, the faint figure from the dim window finally emerges as a moonlight from the past. She joins the conversation reciting her memory recollections as if all the reminiscences, that she once lived through with Kate, came simultaneously to the surface. Her words remind the reader rather of memory brainstorming since it does not fit in the previous dialogue. Non sequiturs are one of the prevailing devices of absurd dramas, this is clearly one of those features. This perplexing juncture also raises the question whether Anna's figure is actual or it should be taken as a suppressed part of the wedded couple. Katherine H. Burkman's theatrical review of the 1994 production suggests this particular reading:

“When the actress playing Anna, Wendy Salkind, turns from the window to join Kate and Deeley's conversation, she plays out to the audience rather than making eye contact with the couple, further emphasizing the possibility that she is a repressed part of the couple's past, a double for Kate and possibly for Deeley as well, who has come back to haunt them with the unresolved issues of their past and their marriage. Once this possibility is established, the actress does make eye contact.”⁴¹

There is always an affliction in people's life that needs to be recuperated; still very often, those difficulties are not properly cured, so they get repressed to the unconscious. People forget however, that in spite of the suppression of their troubled thoughts, the problems will not vanish by the passing of time but they get deeper. However, it is always an easier option to repress the sorrow because in this manner, one does not have to face the harsh reality of life, what is more, one can avoid the pain that the process of recovery triggers. John Stokes describes this phenomenon in connection with the Pinterian theatre:

“In Pinter's view to see beyond yourself is to go beyond theatre, a salutary fact for all who admire his art. When he says that ‘theatre raises our consciousness of the lives we actually lead’ he means our awareness of what we too often ignore or deny about the world which theatre represents.”⁴²

Pinter approaches the acceptance of truth in a mirror metaphor: “When we look into the mirror we think the image that confronts us is accurate. But move a millimetre and the image changes. We are actually looking at a never-ending range of reflections. But sometimes a

⁴¹ Katherine H. Burkman, “Old Times by Harold Pinter”, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 3, (The John Hopkins University Press, Oct., 1994). p. 419.

⁴² John Stokes, “Pinter's late Tapes”, ed. Peter Raby, in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 228.

writer has to smash the mirror – for it is on the other side of that mirror that the truth stares at us.”⁴³

Steven H. Gale argues: “[Pinter] demonstrates that memory of the past can affect the needs and perceptions of the present, and vice versa, although the menace element has undergone a transformation by now.”⁴⁴ This also means that characters might have stuck in their past and their present is determined by the gloominess of old times. Furthermore, they fail to see and appreciate the current moment they are living. If however, the buried, unresolved issues resurface, it may cause nuisance, confusion or even mental collapse as it happens to Deeley at the end of the play. In Burkman’s view: “For those critics who have sometimes accused Pinter of being cold, this production serves as a rejoinder, suggesting always the depths of the restrained passion that leads to its lethal finale.”⁴⁵

The argument between the two characters, Anna and Deeley is evident from the moment when Anna gets physically and verbally involved in the scene. They talk about Kate as if she were not present: “**DEELEY**: She hasn’t made many friends, although there’s been every opportunity for her to do so. **ANNA**: Perhaps she has all she wants. **DEELEY**: She lacks curiosity. **ANNA**: Perhaps she’s happy. *Pause*. **KATE**: Are you talking about me?”⁴⁶

On those rare occasions, when Kate interrupts the reminiscences of Anna and Deeley, she is ignored on account of her being Anna and Deeley’s mutual subject of exchange, thus her presence is not indispensable. When she in fact becomes aware of her passive state, she cannot resist to remark for the second time: “I said you talk about me as if I am *dead*. Now.”⁴⁷

Both characters compete with each other in how well they know Kate’s internal and external traits by introducing shared memories with Kate that only one of them could have experienced with her, deliberately excluding one another from the reminiscence. Anna calls her a dreamer: “She was always a dreamer”⁴⁸; moreover she associates her with a dream-like image: “**ANNA**: She floats from the bath. Like a dream.”⁴⁹ The 1937 George Gerschwin song, – which became memorable by artists like Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra – “They can’t take that away from me” appears in the play that Anna and Deeley take turns at singing. It is not accidental that Anna’s part contains the dream line again: “They way you haunt my dreams...”⁵⁰ This way of singing excludes Kate from the game, which again demonstrates how

⁴³ Stokes, “Pinter’s late Tapes”, p. 227.

⁴⁴ Gale, “The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter”, p.179.

⁴⁵ Burkman, “Old Times” by Harold Pinter, p. 419.

⁴⁶ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 261.

⁴⁷ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 273.

⁴⁸ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 262.

⁴⁹ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 273.

⁵⁰ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 296.

they try to capture Kate's attention and win the battle over her possession. Deeley appears to lose strength, whereas Anna is determined to win and oppress Deeley with her affection to Kate and their mutual past. After all, she is the one who is capable of disturbing a twenty-year-long marriage with memories of old days.

Anna's reaction to the longer passage of Deeley, which uncovers the first rendezvous with Kate, evidently heightens the tension and disturbs him. Her story about the strange "man in the dark across [his] wife's lap"⁵¹ sounds precarious, especially as she introduces the incident: "There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place."⁵² This pronouncement proposes the idea that memory very often distorts the reminiscences in the way as one wants to perceive them, through which "the past acquires an imaginative truth."⁵³ Anna's line echoes Ellen's assertion from Pinter's 1969 play, *Silence*: "Yes, I remember. But I'm never sure that what I remember is of to-day or of yesterday or of a long time ago."⁵⁴ This "spontaneous creation"⁵⁵, as Pinter names it, might be perilous as one can never be entirely certain what he or she imagines to the given experience and what he or she actually has gone through. It does not only mislead the listener of the story, in this particular case Deeley and Kate, but the experiencer herself, Anna as well. She might deceive herself without even noticing it, the same applies to Deeley when he recalls his first encounter with Kate twenty years ago.

He is astounded by the fact that Kate had shared her bed with someone else before they fell for one another. The thought that Kate is not as innocent and shy as he first presumed and Anna's provocative exposure about a potential sexual encounter with other men are visibly a shock to him. He reaches his emotional nadir after Anna's words: "when I'm looking at you now, seeing you so shyly poised over me, looking down at me – **DEELEY**: Stop that!"⁵⁶ Then after a moment of tension, known as a Pinteresque pause, he goes on with his own story and recalls the feelings that Kate triggered in him twenty years before. This confession is a self-confirmation and a persuasion. He tries to believe that Kate was the only one who understood him, yet at the end of his shorter monologue, he becomes hesitant and adds: "That's the position as I saw it then. I mean, that is my categorical pronouncement on the position as I saw it then. Twenty years ago." These last sentences are highly revealing, because they mark the moment of realisation. Things might remain unchanged but the way

⁵¹ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 271.

⁵² Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 270.

⁵³ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 213.

⁵⁴ Harold Pinter, *Silence*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 204

⁵⁵ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 213.

⁵⁶ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 273.

one perceives the actions modifies as time progresses. In this respect, Deeley's utterance might be read as a confirmation of Anna's earlier statement. It suggests that not only memory is capable of deluding one's perceptions, but also the way one senses the circumstances is highly subjective. Deeley does not really know whom he loved until the moment of Anna's entrance into his and Kate's seemingly unperturbed world. He loved the idealised image that he built around Kate's character; he saw his wife, as he imagined her to be. One can mislead himself or herself and even indulge in chimeras up to a relatively long time but certainly not eternally. Anna is the one who makes a clean breast of the married couple's actual situation. This is the moment for Deeley when he becomes conscious of the fact that his visualised picture of Kate does not correspond the reality, in fact his understanding stands in opposition to veracity. Ultimately, this awareness causes his emotional break down at the end of the play.

Even if it is not an explicit and conscious admission that he and Kate were never really meant for each other, it seems now that for the first time in his life he was courageous enough to face his plight and the failures he might have committed in the past. He is strongly affected by his past, moreover he is seemingly stuck in those experiences, and this is the reason why he fails to understand his present. As Bill Naismith argues: "In particular, the individual in the present is affected by his experiences in the past, which cannot easily be defined with certainty. From Pinter's point of view the past is a continuous mystery, a place where both good and bad experiences can be remembered."⁵⁷ Deeley's revelation leads to his final emotional collapse at the end of the play. This moment is the detection: the recognition that he lost the illusion of pretence, the mutual love that had never really existed between him and Kate. Unquestionably, one of the greatest challenges of one's life is to accept the passage and changing of time and the loss of relationships. One's life is a constant recovery of struggles, joy, victories, and falls. Nevertheless, if one sticks in the past, one lets the present pass by unnoticeably.

People consider things to be true, and what they want to conceive as true depends on perspectives only. However, things do not have to belong either to the true or the false category, as they can be both. There is no difference between what is real and what is unreal: the clear division between fantasy and fact wear off.⁵⁸ According to Pinter "[t]here are no hard distinctions what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily true or false: it can be both true and false."⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Naismith, *Harold Pinter*, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Arnold P. Hinchliffe quoted in R. A. Banks, *Drama and Theatre Arts*, (London: Hodder & Soughton, 1992), p. 255.

⁵⁹ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 94.

The Pinterian turn, that Deeley explicitly discloses his and Anna's nodding acquaintance from twenty years earlier at the beginning of the second act, is not too appalling but this is the twist that the reader was already anticipating. The question is rather why this information remained hidden all through the first act. Since on Pinter's stage everything takes place in the right space and at the right moment, it can be safely proclaimed that this detail is perfectly timed too. Deeley's claim that he "never forgets a face"⁶⁰, which indicates that he could identify Anna's face from the very beginning, verifies this assumption.

Noticeably, London is the symbol of the past, the memory that has been left behind by each character; it has a decisive role in all three characters' recollections. It is not accidental that none of them lives there anymore. Nevertheless, the evocation of experiences connected to the city still has a tremendous influence on the current lives of the characters. The same applies to Anna and Kate's affiliation. Regardless of the twenty years that they spent without being physically next to each other, their reciprocal affection and common history appears to be stronger than Kate's attachment to Deeley. Initially, she does not expose much, she appears rather submissive and passive, yet, at the end, she takes control over the actions. In Katherine Burkman's view, Kate is seemingly a victim of the other two characters, who try to dominate over her, but finally her sinister speech confutes all these suppositions.⁶¹ She "has regained lost powers in the element that she cherishes in some of the play's lines-she enjoys walking in the rain, living by the water. If Kate has appeared as victim of the others in the first half of the play, she now takes gradual control of the action."⁶²

Silences that signify the evasion and breakdown of communication in Pinter's plays, have an essential role in this drama as well, so much so that it also creates a frame around the play. The extreme crisis point, as Peter Hall labels the Pinterian silence, pervades the performance, and is not resolved by the end either. Consequently, catharsis cannot take place; the viewer is left in doubts instead of being able to heave a sigh of relief. As Pinter points out: "the laughter, [if any], goes out of any play I've written before it's finished."⁶³ For Pinter everything is funny up to a certain point but the domain of human laughter is limited, therefore the laughter goes out by the end of his plays: "I can't think of any plays of mine in which there are really any laughs at all in the last ten minutes."⁶⁴

Even if the viewer has not found all the answers to his disturbing questions concerning the characters, he has been confronted with the individual problems which appear

⁶⁰ Pinter, *Old Times*, p. 286.

⁶¹ Burkman: *Old Times* by Harold Pinter p.421

⁶² Burkman: *Old Times* by Harold Pinter p.421

⁶³ Naismith, *Harold Pinter* page 11.

⁶⁴ Naismith, *Harold Pinter*, p. 11.

to be customary in one's real life as well. Pinter plays may evoke puzzling questions in the viewer but what is certainly true is that one is able to identify with the character's plight. The dramas depict general human problems, relationship struggles in quotidian setting. These characteristic signs are present in Pinter's 1978 work, *Betrayal* as well, though in a slightly different manner. In the following chapter, it will be more precisely clarified that all these positional changes, that the characters of *Old Times* and *Betrayal* undergo, give account for the justification that Pinter's characters can be trusted "neither when they are talking to others nor when they are talking to themselves."⁶⁵ Additionally, memory very often lies indeed, and as Billington understands Pinter's plays "the past is no more fixed or certain than the present or the future."⁶⁶

It is true for all Pinter dramas that some images of a given play, for instance the place, the characters or even the basic problems exposed, stem from a real personal experience. Pinter often explained the construction of his works: "I've never started a play from any kind of abstract idea or theory."⁶⁷ In another interview he elucidated more precisely: "I start writing a play from an image of a situation and a couple of characters involved, and these people always remain for me quite real; if they were not, the play could not be written."⁶⁸ Michael Billington also confirms: "As so often with Pinter, the play[s] derive from an image that took obstinate root in his memory."⁶⁹ The rich texture of *Betrayal* is interwoven with numerous personal references, probably even more so than by any of his other plays. In connection to both Pinter dramas, it is crucial to mention the group of plays which became known as memory plays. "These plays focus on the past as narrated by the main character. Usually, the play is a dramatic representation of the playwright's life - or at least loosely based upon the playwright's experiences."⁷⁰

In spite of the initial dislike, Harold Pinter and Vivien Merchant got married in the autumn of 1956. Both of them acted in the same theatre company, however for some reason Vivien could not tolerate his presence, so she decided to leave the group with a reasonable excuse. She said: "Well if he doesn't go, I shall have to leave. I can't act with him."⁷¹ Nonetheless, from this point on their love story "gets somewhat murky"⁷², as Billington

⁶⁵ Almansi, Henderson, *Harold Pinter*, p. 20.

⁶⁶ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 213.

⁶⁷ Naismith, *Harold Pinter*, p. 5.

⁶⁸ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 242.

⁶⁹ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 75.

⁷⁰ Wade Bradford, "Memory Play", About.Com. 2012. Web. 26 April 2012. <<http://plays.about.com/od/m/g/Memory-Play.htm>>.

⁷¹ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 53

⁷² Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 53

remarks. In spite of the obscure circumstances, they spent at least a few happy years together until 1962 when Pinter started a relationship that persisted seven years long beside his matrimony with Vivien. This intense experience clearly affected and inspired his 1978 production, *Betrayal*. “With [this play] both the external events and many of the internal details derive directly from his own life.”⁷³ Moreover, one of the early poems of Pinter, called “Episode” from the year 1951 already contains the roots of the play, since it portrays a love triangle. This early poetic piece of writing from Pinter’s literary canon does not only prefigure some traces of his forthcoming objectives in his dramatic career, but also this specific poem is constructed similarly as a dramatic structure. Even though there are more figures introduced who are strongly connected with each other, just in the case of *Betrayal*, they seem to communicate on different levels, in diverse dimensions. Their voices utter monologues rather than dialogues, which reminds the reader of the generic attributes of absurd dramas. The images revive photographic visions with words like “sun” or “storm”, yet they depict static states, a still life. In spite of the problematic situation that the persons in the poem are going through, the astounding effect, that the reader would normally expect to come, fails to show up. Therefore, the illustrated situation can be regarded rather as a contemplation, an exterior analysis of the case which does not take any kind of effect on the listener. *Betrayal* operates likewise, all three characters seem to conceive of their own mutual status quo as strangers to one another; equally, Pinter closes his poem, “Episode” with the line, “And I am her stranger.”⁷⁴

Betrayal is different from the archetypal Pinter play from structural aspect. On the one hand, it is not set in a single room, there is no one specifically violated space, but there are several settings. On the other hand, time is not comprehensible, since it does not follow a logical, sequential order. Each scene is set in a different time and space. Yet it seems that despite the lack of chronology, this technique facilitates the audience’s task in disentangling the story. However, at the first glance, the reversed chronology may disturb the viewer, since this is not the usual form that theatregoers expect from a dramatic work.

Michael Billington points out that what Pinter achieves in *Betrayal*, and also in some sense in *Old Times*, is “very close to what James Joyce and Virginia Woolf accomplished in the novel: the theatrical equivalent of the interior monologue.”⁷⁵ As in *A Slight Ache* or in *The Homecoming*, the viewer has to face the end of marriages, here however, the outcome of the

⁷³ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 257.

⁷⁴ Harold Pinter, “Episode”, *The Poetry Archive*, Poetry Archive. 2005-2010. Web. 26 April 2012.
< <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=2995>>.

⁷⁵ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 191.

story is revealed at the beginning. Through this method, the viewer is capable of seeing the consequences of the events directly. In this sense, Pinter makes the audience's task easier that he explains the causes and effects on the surface. Although it does not necessarily mean that he also unveils the character's motives or actual pasts but rather, he provides an indirect storyline with a seemingly rational ending. In this particular case, since the finale is already given at the beginning, the audience is not confronted with the perplexing conclusion that Pinter usually provides at the end of his stories but principally, the viewer has the task to decipher the character's nature and their own plights in the specified obscure circumstance. As Silvio Gaggi argues: "For the audience the ambiguities are not ambiguities of fact (since we are told the end of the action at the beginning of the play there is no question about the outcome) but ambiguities regarding the relative knowledge and understanding of the three characters."⁷⁶

Katherine H. Burkman comprehends this technique in some sense as the death of the characters: "This backward narrative or exploration of the triangle's life before death may seem at times like an autopsy on characters who have never been very fully alive."⁷⁷

The play starts in the spring of 1977 when the lovers, Emma and Jerry, are already separated for two years. The characters meet in a pub privately for the first time after their split-up. The neutral setting also suggests their current relationship status. However, it is interesting to note that when *Betrayal* was published, Pinter had already been through his divorce with Vivien Merchant. Plainly, the separation distressed him as a private man but it also had an effect on his writing career. *Betrayal* is the first finished play after his dissolution of his marriage⁷⁸, and this demanding period "made it impossible for him to write."⁷⁹

Even though Pinter himself could not entirely recover his private issues yet – and most probably, he could not have performed the same situation with his ex-wife as his characters – the first scene of the play suggests that the former lovers recovered from the dissolution of their affair and at their reunion, they are able to smile again. Nevertheless, they still adhere to their agreed routine, as in the old times: **JERRY**: "You remember the form. I ask about your husband, you ask about my wife."⁸⁰ After the polite small talk, Emma stirs the topic toward another line of discussion: "Ever think of me?" **JERRY**: I don't need to think of you.

⁷⁶ Silvio Gaggi, "Pinter's 'Betrayal': Problems of Language or Grand Metatheatre?", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Dec., 1981), pp. 504-516 p. 505.

⁷⁷ Katherine H. Burkman, "Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*: Life Before Death and After", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 4, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Dec., 1982), pp. 505-518, p. 506.

⁷⁸ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 157

⁷⁹ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 255

⁸⁰ Harold Pinter, *Betrayal*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 8.

EMMA: Oh? **JERRY:** I don't need to *think* of you .*Pause.*"⁸¹ Jerry's reply is somewhat dubious. Either he means that he does not need to think of Emma since he is completely satisfied with her manners, or he does nothing else but thinks of her. The former alternative seems to support this assumption as a few lines later, Emma's enquiry recurs. At this point, Jerry's response is more definite: "I think of you sometimes. *Pause.*"⁸² It is indicated that after each situations "a threat, a moment of non-verbal tension"⁸³, namely Pinter's famous pause occurs. After the perplexing moment, Emma recalls old memories they shared together as lovers: their flat in Kilburn, the play with Emma's daughter in Jerry's kitchen, the new curtains that Emma bought for their flat, and so forth.

Even if these memories do not seem to fade, they are all over and done with. This is what Emma's closing line suggests: "It's all all over."⁸⁴ The duplicate use of "all" is fairly ambiguous, since she has just admitted Jerry that she had revealed their secret love relationship to her husband, since her husband confessed that he had betrayed her. Her statement may refer to her marriage crisis only, though the reader cannot help considering her overall condition, which also includes her romance with Jerry.

After this rather melancholy moment, the setting changes to Jerry's house and the story jumps one step forward, to the same day's evening. Jerry, best friend and traitor of Robert is ostensibly more apprehensive about the fact of infidelity than the cuckolded husband. The absurdity of the situation – that Robert, who has been a victim of infidelity for seven years, not only by his wife but also by his oldest and best friend, and has known about the betrayal for four years, is not bothered about the circumstances whatsoever – suggests that he finds the state of affairs conventional. Outwardly, nothing is more natural in life than cheating and betraying the other, and there are plenty of evidences for that in history. In this respect, betrayal is indeed a common phenomenon; it comes about in workplace, politics, families, friendships or in any interpersonal relations. Thus, the confusing effect is not particularly the occurrence of betrayal but the fact that it is openly accepted and taken for granted, as it were. Generally people do cheat on one another regularly, which, as a rule, discommodates, if not, ruins the other completely. However, as opposed to this case, Robert is entirely unconcerned about the circumstances that he also brings to light before Jerry: "You don't seem to understand that I don't give a shit about any of this. It's true I've hit Emma

⁸¹ Pinter, *Betrayal*, p. 9.

⁸² Pinter, *Betrayal*, p. 10.

⁸³ Hall, "Directing the Plays of Harold Pinter", p. 163.

⁸⁴ Pinter, *Betrayal*, p. 23.

once or twice. But that wasn't to defend a principle."⁸⁵ If Robert's comment does not derive from his actual rage, that is jealousy, then his statement should be interpreted as ignorance and acceptance of the current issue. It points to the fact that unfaithfulness is not deemed to be a serious ethical question. Here however, the viewer has to tackle the matter of disloyalty on various social levels. There are at least five betrayals depicted in the play. It is apparent that Emma has cheated on her husband with Jerry for several years. Even if they do not pronounce themselves as lovers anymore, apparently, they are still attracted to each other. Hence, in this sense, Emma is cheating on Jerry with her new devotee, Casey. Conversely, Robert betrays his wife too, as the reader learns in the very first scene. Jerry is disloyal to his best friend, Robert, as being the long-time lover of his wife. Funnily enough, Robert is also unfaithful to Jerry by not revealing his knowledge about Emma and Jerry's affair.

Pinter was often praised by critics for his remarkable use of language. Martin Esslin draws attention to this skill by claiming: "Pinter has an uncannily accurate ear for the linguistic solecism of the English vernacular spoken by ordinary people, [in order to] amuse his audience by confronting them with accurately observed examples of linguistic nonsense."⁸⁶ Esslin regards Pinter's double tautological elements as part of that "linguistic nonsense". In the break-up scene, when Jerry and Emma look back at their shared times in their flat, Jerry says to Emma: "I don't think we don't love each other"⁸⁷ it is a case in point for this type of linguistic manoeuvre.

In a later – yet chronologically earlier – scene Robert's harshly candid declaration towards Emma puzzles the reader: "I've always liked Jerry. To be honest, I've always liked him rather more than I've liked you. Maybe I should have had an affair with him myself."⁸⁸ Robert's blunt response to Emma's disclosure is not only surprising but also precarious. It is quite apparent that he does not disapprove his wife's infidelity; conversely, his statement proposes an additional reading, according to which he exposes his actual sexual orientation.

At this juncture, the reader comes across another salient parallel between *Old Times* and *Betrayal*: the two old friend couples' strong bond – and in the former production, veiled past – may allude to sexual affection between each another. However, in a Pinter play, "characters can never be trusted."⁸⁹ *Old Times* gives the impression that behind the elusive past of Anna and Kate there is something covert. Either the reader can understand their

⁸⁵ Pinter, *Betrayal*, p. 33.

⁸⁶ Martin Esslin, "Language and Silence", ed. Arthur Ganz in *Twentieth Century Views*, (New Jersey: A Spectrum Book, 1972), p. 34.

⁸⁷ Pinter, *Betrayal*, p. 44.

⁸⁸ Pinter, *Betrayal*, p. 72.

⁸⁹ Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson, *Harold Pinter*, (London: Methuen, 1983), page p. 19.

relation in homosexual terms, or they consent to Steve Water's point of view, which states that: "*Old Times* is in some respects a riposte to and retreat from the menace of feminism. [...] Pinter's women, in narrating their shared past, evoke an idyllic pre-lapsarian world without men."⁹⁰

Yet in *Betrayal*, there is no evidence, not even a slightest hint to a contingent homosexual line in Robert and Jerry's amity. Robert's confusing claim occurs in the scene when Emma reveals her love affair with Jerry. It seems to be more plausible to disregard Robert's assertion as a confession about his actual sexual orientation, and consider it rather as an outraged reaction on his best friend and wife's betrayal. In an earlier scene, yet chronologically it happens a year later, he refuses Emma to join him and Jerry for lunch and their squash play afterwards: "we wouldn't actually want a woman around, would we Jerry? [...] You don't actually want a woman within a mile of the place, any of the places, really."⁹¹ He is similarly rude and "brutally honest"⁹² with Emma as in the Venice scene. Katherine H. Burkman claims that "there is an implication in the speech that Emma has really been an interruption in his relationship with Jerry with whom he still intends to 'play'."⁹³ According to this understanding, Jerry and Robert's squash play is a lucid metaphor for their rivalry, as they are no longer best friends but enemies who both contest for the same woman. From this aspect, Emma is the one who causes the trouble, since with her emergence, she turned the two mates from best friends to foes. Burkman further argues that: "If Jerry actually has any kind of passionate feelings for Emma, they are hostile feelings and relate back to Robert. Recalling how he was best man at her wedding at which he remembers her in white, a colour which she denies having worn."⁹⁴ Burkman's emphasizes that characters recall events as they want them to have happened, furthermore she suggests that in this love triangle, it is not Emma who stands in the limelight of the love triangle but the conflict of two – former – friends. Pinter's note in an interview strongly substantiates this interpretation: "the play is about a nine-year relationship between two men who are best friends."⁹⁵

Characters in Pinter's theatre can never be entirely trusted; therefore, it appears to be a satisfactory answer how Pinter conceives of the matter: "the past is not only what you remember; it is also what you imagine you to remember, or pretend to remember."⁹⁶ It is also

⁹⁰ Steve Waters, "Pinter's Influence on Contemporary Playwriting", ed. Peter Raby, in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 306.

⁹¹ Pinter, *Betrayal*, p. 57.

⁹² Pinter, *Betrayal*, p. 57.

⁹³ Burkman, "Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*: Life Before Death and After", p. 509-510.

⁹⁴ Burkman, "Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*: Life Before Death and After", p. 511.

⁹⁵ Bensky, "An Interview with Harold Pinter", p. 17.

⁹⁶ Almansi and Henderson, *Harold Pinter*, p. 91.

valid for the characters' present, as well as for any statements they make. They have the right to pronounce and interpret anything according to their own will, primarily in order to defend themselves. For this reason, Robert's utterance can also be interpreted as a reckoning or rather as an offence against his wife owing to the pain that she caused him. After all, it is Emma who makes "Robert and Jerry play a gentle trial of strength, an urban battle of wits for [her] attentions."⁹⁷

Billington argues that *Old Times* and *Betrayal* [...] deal with women's desire for unclaimed independence and the power of choice over how they live."⁹⁸ If the reader supports this view, then the drama can be interpreted as Emma's fight for freedom, since she has already made her decision. She confessed her extramarital relationship even before her quarrel with Robert. Nevertheless, her motivation is inscrutable; possibly, she wanted to deepen her relation with Jerry and thus wanted to divorce her husband. However, events did not shift to this direction; as a result, she wanted her ultimate independence from her husband, as well as from her lover. Ordinarily, if a woman has a partner, raises children and does her duty as can be expected from a proper wife and a matron, she will not develop the tendency to drift apart from her family without a cogent reason. Accordingly, Emma is longing for liberty, at the same time however, she cannot get rid of her memories either. She treasures the moments she shared with Jerry but she closed down the affair for a long time, what is more, she has already started a new romance with Casey, which also proves the assumption that she wants to break forth from the love triangle. This conception seems to underpin the analogy that Billington found palpable between James Joyce's *Exile* and Pinter's *Old Times*: "while the two works are very different, both deal with the contest between two figures for the soul and body of a third, and with the ultimate unpossessability of the triumphant heroine. *Exiles* planted seeds which were to germinate many years later in *Betrayal*."⁹⁹ Anthony Roche further claims in his article: "As with the characters in *Exiles*, the characters of *Old Times* and *Betrayal* have suffered some sorrow, leaving them to bear the effects of that sorrow's wounds."¹⁰⁰

Anthony Roche does not only discuss the similarities between Joyce's and Pinter's work, but in connection with both *Old Times* and *Betrayal*, he also introduces another prominent Irish literary figure, W. B. Yeats. Common knowledge has it that Yeats' poetry had a strong impact on Pinter and on the composition of his earlier poetic works. As a result, it is not an accident that Anna in *Old Times* remembers when she and Kate used to read Yeats'

⁹⁷ Almansi and Henderson, *Harold Pinter*, p. 30.

⁹⁸ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 136.

⁹⁹ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 211.

¹⁰⁰ Anthony Roche, "Pinter and Ireland", ed. Peter Raby, in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 210.

poetry together. In both plays it is evidently emphasised that the characters are Yeats admirers too; besides that, according to Billington, Yeats is “the ultimate poet of loss and decline”¹⁰¹, themes that could very much epitomise Pinter’s works. Furthermore, there is another coincidence that two figures, Jerry and Robert, in *Betrayal* work at the area of book publishing, while Emma is running a gallery. What is more, Deeley also works in the cultural sphere; he is a film director and writer.

As has been maintained by Peter Hall – who happened to be the director of the production – the following statement seems apposite to quote “[a]bove all, in the plays of the great middle period (*The Homecoming* and *Old Times* through to *Betrayal*) the principal metaphor of life is presented by the enigma of woman. A man can never, it seems, quite understand the mystery of femininity.”¹⁰²

By now it has become a truism that generally women are regarded less pragmatic than men, hence, they like to treasure – and very often idealise – certain experiences. A seemingly insignificant detail of the story is the recollection of the incident when Jerry threw up Emma’s daughter in the kitchen. This points to a rather remarkable Pinterian characteristic. Jerry and Emma bring about this incident several times throughout the play, yet each of them remembers in a different way. Jerry thinks this episode took place in Emma’s house, while Emma has no doubt that it happened at Jerry’s home. The reader cannot decide which report seems credible, as both hypotheses can be entertained simultaneously.

Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson argue that “[s]ince the real past is for ever lost to human memory [...], we have to make do with an ersatz past, as Pinter intimated in his interview with Gussow: ‘The fact is it’s terribly difficult to define what happened at any time... So much is imagined and that imagining is as true as real.’”¹⁰³

Michael Billington elucidates Pinter’s statement by claiming that “[h]e’s not just suggesting that the memory lies, but that through the very act of remembering, the past acquires an imaginative truth.”¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, Billington adds “that we are never quite sure at what point vivid memory shades into spontaneous creation.”¹⁰⁵

Old Times and *Betrayal* both have the characteristics of what Tennessee Williams coined as “memory play”, yet Pinter’s latter work appears to be exceptional and fairly unusual in terms of its chronology. Although reversed chronology is not entirely unconventional in literature, especially in novels, it is rarely observable in drama. As Alice Rayner claims: “the

¹⁰¹ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 258.

¹⁰² Hall, “Directing the Plays of Harold Pinter”, p. 162.

¹⁰³ Almansi and Henderson, *Harold Pinter*, p. 91-92.

¹⁰⁴ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 213.

¹⁰⁵ Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 213.

beginning of the affair has already been signified by its end, and the end has in some measure created its own beginning. Such is the privilege of fictional constructions.”¹⁰⁶ With this technique, Pinter represents another kind of betrayal: “[t]he closure of narrative form – the story with beginning, middle, and end – betrays on-going reality as much as on-going reality betrays form.”¹⁰⁷ *Old Times* and *Betrayal* intend to dissect past memories and it seems that characters are not able to discard certain remembrances. Consequently, they are also incapable of changing or progressing. Seemingly, actions are repetitive and do not advance in the direction of an eventual outcome, even if some information comes to light by the end of the plays. This feature is one of the most significant characteristics of absurd dramas. Nonetheless, if Pinter’s later works, or any of his works, should be exempted from this categorisation, the development of the story, punctuated by recurring events, appears to be valid for these particular dramas too. Ambiguous pasts, veiled emotions and secreted intentions confuse the modern reader’s own interpretation; therefore, it seems that after reading a Harold Pinter drama, satisfactory answers will not be available. Generally, in 21st century contemporary literature, readers need to deal with multiple meanings, as well as with open-endedness. The same applies to Pinter’s writings and therefore it can be safely stated that all these dramas can be fitted into the post-modern tradition. When Pinter says that “theatre raises our consciousness of the lives we actually lead”¹⁰⁸, he simply means that the viewer’s own suppressed emotions cannot be hidden any longer. Since theatre confronts the audience with their own possible failures and holds up a mirror in order for them to face the harsh realities of quotidian life.

¹⁰⁶ Rayner, “Harold Pinter: Narrative and Presence”, p.484-485

¹⁰⁷ Rayner, “Harold Pinter: Narrative and Presence”, p. 488.

¹⁰⁸ Stokes, “Pinter’s late Tapes”, p. 228.

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