

Memory: The Means of Psychological Domination—A Study of Harold Pinter's *Old Times*

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Abstract

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, with his memory plays Harold Pinter staged his own aesthetic revolution by breaking out of the traps represented by the Comedies of Menace. Pinter, as Noël Coward said, is a genuine original and a superb craftsman. In *Old Times*, he drastically breaks our traditional understanding of "time" and "memory", endowing memory with a special quality. It becomes a net which can be weaved randomly. From the perspective of spatial theory, the paper aims at analyzing the temporal characteristics and spatial characteristics of *Old Times* and exploring the inner world of modern people. It comes to a conclusion that characters create the past story according to their psychological or tactical needs of the moment; in other words, memory is the means of psychological domination. The play also intends to reveal something universal: the sense of crisis and loneliness. Deeley and Anna trap themselves in power struggle because they see each other as a threat to their relationship with Kate. So it suggests that each man is an island.

Keywords: Harold Pinter, *Old Times*, memory, domination, space

1. Introduction

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, with his memory plays Harold Pinter staged his own aesthetic revolution by breaking out of the traps represented by the Comedies of Menace. *Old Times*, one of his memory plays, first presented by the RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company) on 1 June 1971, is still pervading its theatrical charm for its ambiguity. In the play, Harold Pinter drastically subverts our traditional understanding of "time" and "memory": "time" becomes a tunnel where people can come and go freely while "memory" becomes a net which can be weaved randomly. As Anna says in the play, "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" (Pinter, 1981, pp. 27-28). (Note 1) When interviewed by Mel Gussow in 1971, Pinter acknowledged candidly that "The fact is it's difficult to define what happened at any time....So much is imagined and that imagining is as true as real" (Gussow, 1994, p. 17). Here, memory is endowed with a special quality, a kind of vague existence, a space people may paint at will. In Pinter's play, whether "memory" is true or not is not important, and what matters is it reflects the genuine intention of the interlocutor in his/her mind, which he/she intends to cover but unable to cover. The prototype of Pinter's earlier plays, such as *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, with characters fighting for territory has been transformed into the fierce fight for emotion and mind in *Old Times*.

Deeley and Kate have led a quiet and monotonous life for many years. Anna is the only friend of Kate and she has not met Kate for 20 years. At the beginning of the play, the couple are sitting in the living room, discussing Anna's forthcoming visit, while Anna's figure remains still in dim light at the window. After a moment, Anna turns from the window and moves towards the couple, joining their talk. Later, the three reminisce about things past, comparing memories of a time when they may or may not have known one another. Confusingly, the memories run together, diverge, and recombine so that it is difficult to tell who did what, with whom, and when. Whatever the "truth" of the past may be, the reality that the characters react to is the one which they are spontaneously inventing. Here the characters use memory as a weapon of psychological domination.

At the end of 20th century, the academic circle experienced noticeable “spatial turn”. Scholars started to value the spatiality of human life, transferring their preference for time and history as well as social relations and society to space. Joseph Frank is the first person to study spatial theory solemnly, with his writing *Spatial Form in Modern Literature* as the origin of literature study turn. He created a dynamic concept “spatial form”, which refers to a kind of symbolic and metaphorical expression of sequence arrangement and plot relations of text. The proposal of the concept breaks away from the traditional view that literature is merely a temporal art, elucidates explicitly the problem of spatial form in literary expression and claims that modern writers often use the spatial juxtaposition to break the temporal sequence so that literary works are possessed of the effect of spatial art (Frank, 2000, pp. 784-802). *Old Times* and Pinter’s screenplay *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* adopt the means of alternating the present time-space and the historical time-space in order to make characters pass through the present and the historical freely, triggering the readers’ imagination of space. The following discussion will focus on an analysis of the temporal characteristics and spatial characteristics of *Old Times* and explore the inner world of modern people.

2. The Temporal Characteristics of *Old Times*

Since Aristotle’s *Poetics*, western drama has regarded timeliness as the foremost element of dramatic arts. Plot is the first principle among the six elements of tragedy. During the period of classicism, “the three unities” (unity of action, time and place) became the standard of theatre arts. From Aristotle to modern times, western drama has never subverted the unity of plot, and the tradition persisted till the emergence of modernism. “Major works of modernist fiction, following Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and his even more radical *Finnegans Wake* (1939), subvert the basic conventions of earlier prose fiction by breaking up the narrative continuity, departing from the standard ways of representing characters, and violating the traditional syntax and coherence of narrative language by the use of stream of consciousness and other innovative modes of narration” (Abrams, 2004, p. 167). Pinter read a lot of modern literary works and was deeply influenced by modernism. His memory plays often break the linear narration, as if the narrative time is fixed on a certain point in the reminiscence of past events, such as *Landscape*, *Silence* and *Family Voices*. In these plays, each image is reflected on a point rather than a complex image reflected on a straight line. Characters’ consciousness flows like water at will but the present time is blurred, with characters completely living in memory. In *Landscape* and *Silence*, even though the characters feel incompatible with the real world, it seems that memory is still the true past experience. But in *Old Times*, Pinter thoroughly subverts audience’s traditional view of time and memory.

Firstly, the past is interwoven with the present. The play starts with the three characters’ presence on stage. Deeley and Kate are talking about Anna and her upcoming visit while Anna is still standing in half darkness at the window. Then, suddenly, Anna steps forward into the light and enters the conversation. Anna’s abrupt entrance into the action confuses critics mightily. Some critics have wondered whether Anna is actually existing on stage. Is Anna a figment of Kate’s and / or Deeley’s imagination, a character from Kate’s or Deeley’s memory, or Kate’s alter ego? (Gale, 1990, p. 115) Such kind of questions can frequently arise when his plays are criticized, but there is no doubt that her emergence implies that the co-occurrence of the past staying in memory and the present when past events are recalled. Although her first speech is about the past, it is not about the past in the way that Kate and Deeley’s talk has been, (i.e., trying to remember what somebody looked like in a time gone by). For Anna the past was good, full of parks and innocence and excitement and cafés and artistic friends, which she recalls animatedly as though its essence still remained because it happened so recently. Pinter himself acknowledged in a *New York Times* interview with Mel Gussow: “I certainly feel more and more that the past is not past, that it never was past. It’s present” (Billington, 1996, p. 206).

The juxtaposition of the past and the present as well as memory and reality also occurs at the end of Act One.

Anna: (*Quietly.*) Don’t let’s go out tonight, don’t let’s go anywhere tonight, let’s stay in. I’ll cook something, you can wash your hair, you can relax, we’ll put on some records.

Kate: Oh, I don’t know. We could go out.

Anna: Why do you want to go out?

Kate: We could walk across the park.

Anna: The park is dirty at night, all sorts of horrible people, men hiding behind trees and women with terrible voices, they scream at you as you go past, and people come out suddenly from behind trees and bushes and there are shadows everywhere and there are policemen, and you’ll have a horrible walk...

Pause

You’ll only want to come home if you go out. You’ll want to run home...and into your room.... (pp. 39-40)

It is worth to notice that the above dialogue is in the present tense. However, we find awesomely later on that what they are talking about is London where they lived twenty years ago rather than the countryside where Kate is now staying. A time shift has taken place quietly, and the two time chains (the past and the present) are oddly twisted. Twenty years ago when the two girls lived in London it is possibly Anna who dominated Kate's life. Kate once resisted Anna's powerful control but her resistance was somewhat weak for Anna could take back the floor very soon. As the above dialogue shows, Anna grasps firmly Kate's heart by saying "you'll only want to come home." Deeley remains in the present while Anna and Kate seemingly move into the past. Deeley seems to be isolated and becomes the odd man out.

Secondly, the past is no more fixed or certain than the present or the future. In other words, memory can be weaved randomly according to the needs of characters. They use memory as a weapon to prove that they more clearly remember the past, and thus know the other person better. The battlefield is Kate, and she is reduced to an object for the sake of which Deeley and Anna fight to show that they have possessed more of Kate. In this battle, Deeley and Anna often convince the others that she/he has the truer knowledge of the past. Their account of the film *Odd Man Out* which both claimed to have watched with Kate can be given as an example to demonstrate how the characters create their own version of the past by inventing and reshaping their memories, and impose them upon the other characters to gain the control of the battle. The title of the film is symbolic and its verbal meaning is "the man who is incompatible with others and forced out". It indicates Deeley's and Anna's underlying motive for their struggle. When Deeley tells his story about seeing the film, he claims that they met at the cinema for the first time and there was no other audience but him and Kate, "there she is. And there she was"(p. 26). Deeley first uses the present tense and then he soon corrects the tense. In his subconscious, Kate belongs to him not only at present but also in the past. He even emphasizes that their acquaintance is based on Robert Newton (one of the main actors in the film) by saying "it was Robert Newton who brought us together and it is only Robert Newton who can tear us apart" (p. 26). So no one can separate Kate from him and end his dominance over Kate. However, Anna later on recalls that she has seen a wonderful film called *Odd Man Out* with Kate and it is Kate who excitedly hurried to see it. Anna's account is obviously contradictory with Deeley's account. Which one is what really happened? In Pinter's plays, memories are shapable, ambiguous and uncertain; thus they cannot be verified. Such kind of contradictory account can be seen here and there in *Old Times*. For example, Kate tells Deeley that Anna often stole her underwear but in Anna's memory it is Kate who lent her underwear to Anna. Memory is no longer people's true experience. Characters can recreate their own story and take memory as a weapon to fight against others. Since none of the characters can easily control how the past is represented, even false memories become part of their reality.

3. The Spatial Characteristics of *Old Times*

Theoretically, time and space, as the existent way of matter, cannot be separated. The space expression has been one of the aspects examined since the birth of drama. "Spectacle", one of the elements of Aristotle's tragedy, also refers to the spatial effects of drama. The narrative space of Chinese ancient opera is characterized by continual flow and free transformation while that of western drama is highly-focused and highly-condensed. As John Dryden asserted in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, under Unity of Place, the plot should be laid in a single city, ideally in a single room (Richter, 1998, p. 161). Undoubtedly, space is attached so much importance because it can play an inestimable role in the formation and realization of meaning in the whole play. Place where action happens often has great symbolic and metaphorical value. Playwright, in most cases, uses the fictional place to construct the image about the world, which can represent symbolically the essential features of society and natural environment. The French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre published *The Production of Space* in 1974 and has since aroused scholars' interest in space. His space theory counts because it makes people get rid of traditional view of space which is simple and empty, exhibits the social and historical content carried by space, and reveals that space can be produced.

Space juxtaposition is the first spatial characteristic of *Old Times*. Here, the space refers to "story space". With the advance of the story, memory constantly traverses between the actions. Anna's first detailed stream-of-consciousness account of London takes readers from the present to the old times, so London where Kate and Anna once lived is contrasted with the countryside where Kate is now staying, which implies the contrast between the past and the present, subconscious and consciousness as well as two kinds of living style. Twenty years ago, Kate and Anna often went to a concert, or the opera, or the ballet, or the private cafés they found where artist and writers and sometimes actors collected (pp. 14-15). They lived a colorful and romantic life in London, compared with the quiet and monotonous life in the country. Steven H. Gale has pointed out: "The life in London that she (Anna) describes clearly exists in her mind, whether as a vivid memory, as a spontaneous creation, or as a combination memory/creation" (Gale, 1990, p. 116). To some extent, Anna's

account lays claim to a prior superior knowledge of Kate, boasts about her intimacy with Kate as a girl and wins an advantageous status in the battle with Deeley. On the other hand, Kate's present life in the country is dim and dark with no vitality, which further puts Deeley in an inferior position. In the following part of the play, Anna frequently recalls their past life in London, like reading Yeats half the night with Kate, telling Kate anything of interest when she got back. She tells those stories quite tactically, intending to control time to cover up a twenty-year gap and to make the past more alive than the present.

In the announcement of the 2005 Noble Prize for Literature, the Swedish Academy noted that Pinter "restored theatre to its basic elements: an enclosed space and unpredictable dialogue" (Donahue, 2005). "Room" is an important image in his plays, which reflects characters' struggle for territory and power, such as *The Room*, *The Caretaker*. However, in *Old Times*, the image of "room" is transformed and extended, with characters more concerned about dominating another's mind or mental space, which is the second spatial characteristic of the play. Deeley and Kate are a married couple living in their converted farmhouse away from London while Anna is Kate's former roommate 20 years ago. Anna is coming to "celebrate a very old and treasured friendship" (p. 64). She intends to recreate the past friendship with Kate but Deeley regards her as a potential threat to his marriage. The threat initiates the power struggle between the characters. Kate becomes the trophy of the war due to the affection of her husband and her friend. They wield memory as a weapon to get ultimate domination of another person. For example, Deeley does not show any signal of knowing Anna in Act One, but in Act Two he claims to have met her in The Wayfarers Tavern twenty years ago, bought her a few drinks and gazed up her thighs. He degrades her by recalling how she once displayed her female body to male gaze, and how she made herself sexually available: "You had escorts. You didn't have to pay. You were looked after" (p. 46). Faced with Deeley's account, Anna seems quite doubtful about the truth. True or false? It's unprovable, but there are lots of hints to indicate that Deeley is recollecting the past to suit his own needs. By reducing her to the level of a sexual object, he manages to bring her into subservience in the present. Mental space becomes the central image of *Old Times*. Even though Deeley and Anna spare no effort to be involved in the power struggle, neither of them becomes the final winner. Absurdly, Kate breaks her silence, takes her turn to exert power by making the last and longest speech and presents her own version of memory to declare victory over Deeley and Anna.

4. Conclusion

Noël Coward has ever described Pinter as "a genuine original" and "a superb craftsman, creating atmosphere with words that sometimes are violently unexpected" (Peacock, 1997, p. 108). Many people consider *Old Times* Pinter's best plays. He breaks people's traditional understanding of time and memory, endowing memory with a special quality. It becomes a net which can be weaved randomly and possesses both temporal characteristics and spatial characteristics. Pinter makes the readers realize a fact that memory is fallible. The above analysis shows that characters create the past in response to the psychological or tactical needs of the moment; in other words, memory is the means of psychological domination. However, in real life, people sometimes are not so sure of what happened in the past, and in other times there are things people remember which may never have happened but as people recall them they become reality. Therefore, the play intends to reveal something universal: the sense of crisis and loneliness. Both Deeley and Anna sees each other as a threat to their relationship with Kate, so they wield memory as a weapon to give a blow to each other and expect to get the ultimate control of Kate. Their struggle reflects modern people's inner world. Marriage and friendship are not so stable as before, which can be destroyed by outside intrusion. It suggests that each man is an island. As Sartre said, hell is other people.

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Note

Note 1. In the following discussion, quotation from Pinter's *Old Times* (Harold Pinter, *Plays: Four*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1981) will be marked directly in the text, followed by the page number.

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