

“old times”

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In Pinter: A Study of His Plays, Martin Esslin mentions three levels of possible interpretation for Old Times. According to him, Pinter's play could be interpreted on a realistic level, or either representing the male character's dream or a ritual game. He correctly remarks, though, that none of those levels excludes the others, because "... they must co-exist to create the atmosphere of poetic ambivalence on which the image of the play rests."¹

Despite having stated that the three levels must co-exist, Esslin has given much more attention to the realistic interpretation than to the others. On the realistic level, his interpretation appears as rather farfetched, and will not be examined here. Nevertheless, when working upon this level of interpretation, he refers to the verbal combat between Deeley and Anna, which is of great importance for the analysis on the other levels, for this duel reinforces the ritualistic side of the play through its repetitions, and it also stresses Deeley's preoccupations with his own masculinity, and the several hints that Anna and Kate represent two sides of the same personality, two aspects which reinforce the interpretation of Old Times as a dream.

The play shows the duel between Deeley and Anna in order to possess Kate, or at least, to find out who has had more intimacy with her. Anna is the subject of the opening dialogue between the other two. She remains with her back to the audience, standing against the window in the rear. While she stays in dim light, Deeley shows a great preoccupation with her, and, despite Kate's evasive answers, he wants to know more and more about their friend-

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¹ Martin Esslin, Pinter; A Study of His Plays (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), p. 188.

ship. There are several hints that he is jealous of his wife's friend even before she begins to take part in the action. He is ironic when he says that she was incomparable, he insists upon what had attracted Kate to her, and does not understand why she is not bringing her husband. He also insists on the fact, which was unknown to him, that the two women had lived together: "I knew you had shared with someone at one time..."²

With Anna's appearance, Kate takes less and less part in the conversation, and the duel between Deeley and Anna starts. Their conflict begins with her use of words which he says he had not heard for a long time, like "gaze", "lest", or "rather beguilingly so".³ It is very much increased when Anna accuses him of attempting to exert an absolute control over his wife: "You have a wonderful casserole."⁴ She refers to Kate as if she were a mere object in his hands.

The duel becomes really violent when Deeley relates his first meeting with Kate. He gives a hint of a lesbian relationship by referring to the episode of the two usherettes, to which, as Arthur Ganz points out, there is "a touch of homosexual revenge in Deeley's passionate admiration for the performance of Robert Newton: 'And I would commit murder for him, even now.'"⁵ Deeley also confesses his distance from Kate, when he says that she was "at the dead centre of the auditorium. I was off centre and have remained so,"⁶ in which case he can be related to the

² Harold Pinter, Old Times (New York: Grove, 1971), p. 17.

³ Pinter, pp. 19, 26, 41.

⁴ Pinter, p. 20.

⁵ Arthur Ganz, "Mixing Memory and Desire: Pinter's vision in Landscape, Silence, and Old Times," in Pinter, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Arthur Ganz (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 172.

⁶ Pinter, p. 30.

film title: Old Man Out. Anna's retort is no less violent: "There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened."⁷ She gives her version of the story, which contradicts his by telling that she had accompanied Kate to the movies. Memories and their fallibility become more and more the central factor.

Deeley tries another strategy in Act Two. Instead of facing Anna, he tries to convince her of their own former intimacy. His question - "You prefer it white with sugar, I believe?"⁸ - suggests his having met her before, as do his subsequent stories about the pub and the party. At first, she disagrees. Later, without denying it, she uses his stories in her favor, as she had done before. When Deeley suggests that Anna should dry Kate, he tries to impose his masculinity by including Anna in his plans: "After all, I am her husband. But you can supervise the whole thing... That'll kill two birds with one stone."⁹ As Kate returns, they re-enact the musical excerpts, and, when Anna mentions facts about her life with Kate which were unknown to him, Deeley's reaction shows how upset he is: "Sounds a perfect marriage."¹⁰

Near the end the initial situation is reversed. Instead of Deeley asking questions and Kate, reluctantly, answering them, now it is Kate who takes active part in the action. Anna speaks less and less, and it is Kate who brings the facts to surface. She mentions having found Anna dirty and dead on her bed. "Dead," in this case, must be interpreted as not belonging to Kate's life any more, because impure. When the man, or Deeley, takes Anna's place, Kate tries to dirty his face, which suggests that he had made sexual

⁷Pinter, pp. 31-32.

⁸Pinter, p. 47.

⁹Pinter, p. 56.

¹⁰Pinter, p. 66.

advances toward her. They are both dead for Kate: "Neither mattered."¹¹ In the end, the story of the man crying in their room is re-enacted and Kate is the one who imposes her power. Neither of them counts for her. According to Arthur Ganz, Kate refuses "to grant Deeley the passionate arousal he desires from her. His tears are of no avail, for Kate will accept him only in a submissive, childlike position, 'lying across her lap on her bed.'"¹² Her bath, twice mentioned, would express her frigidity, an idea also reinforced by her referring to the water in their place as "very soft."¹³

In order to interpret the play as a ritual game, it is necessary to observe the great number of re-enactment present in the play. A consequence of such interpretation would be a loss in the impact of Anna's abrupt appearance. She would be there merely waiting for her cue to start acting her role in a private play within a play.

An almost perfect symmetry can be found in the way scenes are organized. There are several re-enactments of scenes, stories that are retold (although differently), recurrent dialogues and situations, sentences that are repeated by the same or other of the characters, and several points of contact between the two acts, which amounts to sort of a repetition in Act Two of what happens in the first.

The setting is changed from the living-room to the bedroom, but the furniture is similar, except that it is in reversed positions. This change can be interpreted as expressing the final reversal that will take place in the game performed by the characters, that is, Kate's power imposed at the end.

¹¹Pinter, p. 73.

¹²Ganz, p. 173.

¹³Pinter, p. 59.

Act One begins with Kate and Deeley talking about Anna, while the latter remains apart, at the window. Act Two begins with Anna and Deeley talking about Kate. When the latter returns, she goes to the window without talking. This scene is central to the play, and is opposed either to the beginning, or to the sequence near the end, when Anna ends her speeches and Kate increases her participation.

The two versions of Anna's theft of Kate's underwear are told one in each act. The songs are also re-enacted in the second act, in a central position, just as in Act One. The two versions of Deeley and Kate's first meeting at the movies are told in Act One, which is balanced in Act Two by the two stories Deeley tells of his former meetings with Anna at the tavern and at the party. And the story about the man sobbing in their room, told by Anna in Act One, has its second version told by Kate in the end, and they finally re-enact it.

Anna approaches and speaks for the first time after Deeley says that "... none of this matters."¹⁴ It is the first long speech in the play, and tells about the women in the past, in London, under rain. This scene is related to Kate's first long speech, when, after returning from her bath, she says the water in their place is softer than in London. In Kate's final and long speech, she says: "Neither mattered," which reminds us of Anna's introduction. In the end, Kate remembers Anna as being dead, while in Act One she complained about Anna and Deeley speaking as if she were the one who was dead.

Several words and sentences, at a certain point used by one of the characters, are employed by other characters later. In the beginning, before Anna's introduction, as Deeley expresses his ignorance about Kate not having many friends, she answers: "I had none. None at all. Except

¹⁴Pinter, p. 17.

her."¹⁶ In Act Two, Deeley asks Anna if she is going to visit anyone else while in England. Her answer is: "No. I know no one. Except Kate."¹⁷ Anna's words are almost exactly a reproduction of Kate's speech in the former act. They behave as though rehearsing for a theatre performance. Ironically, in opposition to those two statements, in both acts, while Deeley remains apart from the dialogue, the women discuss the possibility of inviting some people to spend the evening with them. Interestingly enough, the subject of their conversation is only about men that they knew, which leaves Deeley more and more isolated. He is the odd man out again.

In Act One, while discussing cooking, the characters engage in the following dialogue:

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

Anna: What kind of things?

Kate: Oh, you know, that sort of thing.¹⁸

A little later, Deeley incorporates her words into his own vocabulary: "She likes taking long walks. All that. You know... All that kind of thing."¹⁹ Such appropriations are another way of representing the conflict between Deeley and Anna, for they are the ones who take hold of other people's words, and, between the two, he is the one who makes more use of such a device. A little after Anna says "... she'd look round at me, flicking her hair, and look at me as if I were part of her dream."²⁰ Deeley takes hold of her expression: "...and she looked at me, ... flicking her hair back, and I thought she was even more fantastic than

¹⁶Pinter, p. 10.

¹⁷Pinter, p. 64.

¹⁸Pinter, p. 21.

¹⁹Pinter, p. 24.

²⁰Pinter, p. 25.

Robert Newton."²¹ Even the word "gaze," which he finds so strange when first used by Anna, he will use five times when referring to the party in Westbourne Grove.²²

All the above details allow us to say that Pinter had the intention to show a ritual game, which would express the characters' attempt to recover some past experience, and, through the great number of repetitions and re-enactments, he also tried to reinforce the appearance of a dream. Martin Esslin remarks:

The more playful aspects of *Old Times*, the sequences in which Anna and Deeley recall the popular tunes of the early fifties, for example, or the evocations of life in postwar London, would fit such interpretation. The real antagonisms between the husband and the wife's woman friend would then naturally emerge from the playfulness of the ritual game, as the inevitable jealousies in such a marriage-à-trois.²³

While not excluding the interpretations as a duel or as a ritual game, which in fact, add to the effect that the play produces, the third level of interpretation - that is - to consider the play as a dream, or as imagined by Deeley is the one which embodies a more total vision of the work.

Due to the fact that Deeley is the only character who is always present, the play may be considered as the representation of his dream or as the expression of his imagination. On this level, it is very important to have in mind Anna's words in Act One: "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."²⁴ Deeley refers to his

²¹Pinter, p. 31.

²²Pinter, pp.51-52.

²³Esslin, p. 188.

²⁴Pinter, p. 24.

occupation as a filmmaker, and, as such, the play may show his dream or his professional imagination in action, which, mixed with facts of his private life, bring his frustrations to surface.

A dream is a phenomenon that is vague and recurrent. It appears once and then returns in the same or different shape, not taking into account any considerations of time or space limitations, or even people's individuality. In this view. Anna's sudden appearance may be regarded as natural. As it would happen in a dream, Anna turns from the window and talks, as if she had been taking part in the dialogue all the time. This sudden appearance may be interpreted as a cinematographic device to shorten the action, which proceeds as though they had been together for a long time. Regarded as a cinematographic device and linked to Deeley's profession, this fact reinforces the idea that the play shows Deeley's imagination in action. Anna's presence all the time is also important to suggest the existence of someone who remains between the couple, somewhat hidden in the past, but always there.

The different versions of the several stories told in the play would be the development of the dream as it takes different shapes whenever it reoccurs. In the same way, the women's dialogues about the boyfriends could be considered as sudden plunges into the past that would naturally fit into a dream-like structure.

Two facts are very important. The first one is that Deeley definitely shows a great preoccupation with his masculinity, as the way he duels for Kate's affection shows, or the many times he mentions that he is her husband, as when discussing with Anna about powdering Kate - "After all, I am her husband,"²⁵ - or later, when Anna says that he is the one who should know how Kate was in passion, "Well,

²⁵Pinter, p. 25.

you're damn right... Of course it's my bloody province. I'm her husband."²⁶ What such preoccupation conveys is a feeling of frustration that Deeley finds in his situation as a husband, of sexual inadequacy, probably because his wife does not correspond to his passionate desires. In such a case, the two women may be regarded as being the two sides of the same person. Anna would be the passionate Kate that Deeley expected to find, but did not, for his wife would have rejected both her passionate side and his desires as "dirty," which explains why the others are dead for her.

Deeley's frustration as a husband is also shown in his preoccupation with Anna's husband, shown in the very beginning, and in Act Two, when they talk about Anna's villa in Taormina, on which occasion he practically identifies himself with the other, while referring to his isolation: "What worries me is the thought of your husband rumbling about alone in his enormous villa..."²⁷

The indications that the two women are the same person accumulate scene by scene. First, Anna steals Kate's underwear, and later she admits having done so; Deeley had seen Odd Man Out alone with Kate, but later Anna says that she was there too. Deeley mentions having seen Anna before, at the pub and at the party, where he had looked up her skirt all evening; Anna admits this fact later, and he reinforces their identification: "Looking up your skirt in her underwear. Mmmnn."²⁸ A little later, he practically states: "She thought she was you... Maybe she was you. Maybe it was you, having coffee with me, saying little, so little."²⁹ And Kate also gives a hint: "You tried to do my

²⁶Pinter, p. 66.

²⁷Pinter, p. 67.

²⁸Pinter, p. 65.

²⁹Pinter, p. 69.

little trick, one of my tricks you had borrowed, my little slow smile, my little slow shy smile, my bend of the head, my half closing of the eyes, that we knew so well..."³⁰

Deeley's occupation as a filmmaker is also very important. It reinforces his tendency to impose his masculinity through the manipulation of other people. The following speech expresses a feeling of frustration that may refer either to his married life or to his profession, or even to both: "I had a great crew in Sicily... I wrote the film and directed it. My name is Orson Welles."³¹ Here Deeley expresses his urge for power, not only over his wife, but also over all the others. He may have written and directed the film, but he is not Orson Welles. And Kate is not the passionate Anna he desires. The film he intended to make has not come true. The bright lights in the end may represent his return to reality. Nothing remains but his wife's indifference.

³⁰Pinter, p. 72.

³¹Pinter, p. 42.

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