

HOME AS A BATTLEFIELD: POWER AND GENDER IN HAROLD PINTER'S THE COLLECTION, THE LOVER AND OLD TIMES

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ABSTRACT: *Harold Pinter has been hailed as a dramatist among the half-dozen best dramatists, able to use his considerable wit in unusual, resonant and riveting ways. The central theme of his work is one of the dominant themes of twentieth-century art: the struggle for meaning in a fragmented world. His characters are uncertain of whom or what they understand, in whom or what they believe, and who or what they are. Pinter's characters operate by a stark 'territorial imperative,' a primal drive for possession. In his plays, the struggle for power is an atavistic one between male and female. Hence sexuality as a means of power and control is our priority in discussing a select set of Pinter's playscripts. We here examine the element of sexuality in these chosen texts analysing the relationship between male and female characters, as they snipe and sling potshots across the most intimate of all battlefields: our home and castle. The texts are studied individually, in sequence, in an attempt to lay bare the technique and leverage of sexual negotiations in Pinter's work.*

KEYWORDS: Gender, Power, Sexuality, Relationships, Harold Pinter

Introduction:

Three plays by Harold Pinter, not perhaps his best known, *The Collection*, *The Lover* and *Old Times*, show how the playwright cruelly, but critically, investigates how sensible men have to get their rocks off, no matter what the social cost. This paper will attempt to examine the ways male characters in these three plays go about achieving this aim and the role played by female characters. The issue of power and authority is of paramount importance in the these three plays which will be discussed and analysed in relation to the issue of sexuality.

The Collection (1962) involves four characters, one female and three males, and is a sort of detective story. James wants to prove his wife Stella's infidelity. What happened between her and Bill one night in a hotel room. Bill and Harry are both in the rag trade, probably members of a minor homosexual ménage. James and Stella have to run a boutique, first one of their marital problems.

Perhaps *The Collection* is an anxiety dream, depicting a

Progressive fulfilment of the wish to have a mother. In other words, the struggle to purge her, along with father, is reversed into a struggle to possess her. However, mother is disguised, recognisable only as in the latent content. On the surface she is a girlfriend or a wife, but the male who would possess her transfers to her the attitudes and inadequacies associated with Mother. (Gabbard: 141-2)

This approach might not be applied (for the present writer) to *The Collection*. This play deals with the wife/prostitute polarity, sex in and out of wedlock. The framework of a power struggle here touches both on a heterosexual and a homosexual ménage. Stella the wife James thinks he knows, or the whore he suspects? (Hinchliffe: 175). Pinter is raising the question of name tag. Is the person we live with the same person that others see? He is saying: 'Who are you?' James wants to know the real Stella; Harry wants to know the real Bill.

Harry and Bill, in homosexual tryst, jeopardize that very rapport. A first telephone call from James is answered by Harry: 'Are you a friend of his?' (p121.) The question suggests a sexual notion:

Though 'friend' here is sexually equivocal, it is one of the bizarre angles of Pinter's almost trigonometric form that James does indeed appear to strike up a friendship with his wife's supposed seducer, Bill, a homosexual. (Knowles: 33-4)

Stella has told James about her assignation with Bill in a hotel in Leeds. James, moving to find out the truth, is faced with other versions of that story. His first encounter with Bill occurred when he pushed into Bill's flat, helping himself to food and drink, and then intimidating his host. James acts with Bill as he wants to believe Bill acted with Stella. (Hinchliffe: 36). Although the tension is there, we see James with Bill as different from a conventional husband talking to the man he suspects of having slept with his wife.

James: Got any olives?

Bill: How did you know my name?

James: No olives?

Bill: Olives? I'm afraid not.

James: You mean to say you don't keep olives for your guests?

Bill: You're not my guest, you're an intruder.

What can I do for you? (*The Collection*: 129)

The edginess is sharpened again by James' confronting Bill about his conduct with Stella. He speaks as if he knew exactly what happened that night. Bill neither confirms nor denies the story. It is part of Pinter's technique to elevate the queasiness of uncertainty in order to increase the attention of his audience. James, trying to "disguise his feelings by affecting an intermittent insouciance, is matched by Bill's ductile complaisance, which can negotiate both heterosexual rebuff or homosexual overture." (Knowles: 38)

James misrepresents to Stella the nature of his first encounter with Bill by exaggerating that avowedly innocent friendship. He distorts what happens. His fabrication forces us to guess that much of what he says is fabricated:

James: He entirely confirmed your story.

Stella: Did he?

James: Mmm. Only thing – he rather implied that you led him on. Typical masculine thing to say, of course.

Stella: That's a lie.

James: You know what men are. I reminded him that you'd resisted, and you'd hated the whole thing, but that you'd been – can we say – somehow hypnotised by him, it happens sometimes. He agreed it can happen sometimes. He told me he'd been hypnotised once by a cat. Wouldn't go into any more details, though. Still, I must admit we rather hit it off. We've got the same interests. He was most amusing over the brandy. (p.143)

James says that he and Bill have the same interests. Are these homosexual ones, or interests in the fashion business?

Although the sexually suggestive dialogue between Bill and James amuses, for it provides a prospect of homosexual triangle in addition to the other configurations. (Dukore: 33)

This triangle of homosexuality involving (Bill, Harry, James) suggests that James cannot find security as a heterosexual with Stella. Security might flow from a liaison with Bill. Bill may have mislaid his security with Harry and might restore his sense of safety by looking for a heterosexual affair:

The value of the incident in Leeds, wherever it was, is that its consequences illuminate all the insecurities that the characters have about each other. Harry doesn't trust Bill, James doesn't trust Stella and neither Bill nor Stella, obviously, are finding fulfilment in their lives with their partners. (Hayman, 1968: 49-50)

Harry is not involved in the issue. He is, like James, jealous, and this makes him behave erratically. It makes him speak in fantasy mode, with studied casualness:

Bill: I don't want any potatoes, thank you.

Harry: No potatoes? What an extraordinary thing. Yes, this chap,
he was asking for you. He wanted you.

Bill: What for?

Harry: He wanted to know if you ever cleaned your shoes with furniture polish.

Bill: Really? How odd/

Harry: Not odd. Some kind of national survey.

Bill: What did he look like?

Harry: Oh.....Lemon hair, nigger-brown teeth, wooden leg,
Bottle-green eyes and a toupe. Know him? (p139.)

Harry is alarmed by the telephone calls and by James' visits. He feels insecure because of James' intrusion into his life with Bill. This incident is threatening his gay life with Bill. If

the liaison with Stella had happened, then surely Harry does not satisfy Bill. So he goes out looking for a heterosexual pastime. If Stella is making the story up, then he mistrusts Bill, and at the same time it raises the question of whether Bill is what Harry sees or what others see.

Harry, alarmed at the effect James's visits are having on his own relationship with Bill, goes off to see Stella, who knows that James has made the story up. James may have found some consolation in Bill; he reminds him of a 'bloke' he went to school with called Hawkins. So James had a homosexual relationship in the past and he feels maybe more secure with men than women. James is revealing his insecurity about his heterosexual relationship with Stella. His long speeches about Bill constitute a criticism of their constricted marriage:

He's a very cultivated bloke, your bloke, quite a considerable intelligence at work there, I thought. He's got a collection of Chinese pots stuck on a wall, must have cost at least fifteen hundred a piece. Well, you can't help noticing that sort of thing. I mean, you couldn't say he wasn't a man of taste. He's brimming over with it. Well, I suppose you must have struck you the same way. No, really, I should thank you, rather than anything else. After two years of marriage it looks as though, by accident, you've opened up a whole new world for me. (p144)

All the characters try to confuse each other. There is no direct answer to the question: has Bill slept with Stella? Harry wants to confuse Stella and Bill. The generalized game of confusion suggests that none of the characters trust the other. James and Stella find no fulfillment as heterosexual partners. Harry and Bill find fulfillment in their supposed queer relationship. Without sketching in past history or developing it in the present, Pinter draws on these insecurities to build up a nastily effective tension. (Hayman: 50).

The play displays a male-dominated world. It concentrates on three males, neglecting Stella who bursts into tears under pressure from James. We also have

Social comment on the situation in those strata of English middle –class society (and they are, after all, by no means significant) where homosexual attitudes among the men play a decisive role in determining the social climate. (Esslin: 135)

Male involvement in fighting transforms their relationship into one of intimacy and strong mutual concern. It is a melange of sex and masculinity. The friendship between male characters in *The Collection* is a frisson of exclusive masculinity courted in the teeth of adult sexuality and heterosexual love. James is attracted to Bill, who stimulates his adult homosexual desire in forbidden, psychic depths.

The Lover (1963) promotes an alternative course of action for couples in stale relationships. The people in *The Collection* weave private fantasies and threaten each other with substitute alliances; the characters in *The Lover* attempt to be all things to one another. They communicate longing to each other. (Gabbard: 157)

The Lover deals with a relationship between a husband (Richard) and a wife (Sarah). Their marriage has gone flat and they are trying to keep it alive. From a psychoanalytic point of view, they have "the craving for stimulation which is so often the feature of the love of adults." (Freud on *Narcissism*, 14: 99-100.) We can relate Freudian theory to *The Lover* and

see it as a dream, in which Sarah becomes Richard's mother, and he becomes a child with oedipal desires. (Gabbard: 159)

The Lover is an escape from reality into an erotic world, where each partner is trying to create a role for the other. Their lives cannot continue, so they have to create another world to reinforce their relationship. *The Lover* continues the sexual problematic and pushes it a stage further. *The Lover* carries the sex ingredient to a new refinement by admitting that the wife is maybe both wife *and* whore. (Hinchliffe: 175)

Sarah confirms the question about dual femininity by admitting that she can be at once wife and whore. The first words of the play are derisive and shocking: "Is your lover coming today?" (*The Lover*: 161)

This gives a deceptive sense of an open marriage. Is it realistic that a wife admits infidelity and gains her husband's approval? We discover that the thing is a sport created by Richard, by Sarah, or both. There is also Pinter's game afoot, making us sort out the fiction from the facts. So the play has

...an unpleasant side to it, and the characters work up a good deal of anger about infidelities which may be imaginary, but the anger illuminates characteristics which wouldn't otherwise have been seen. (Hayman: 55)

Each character creates another role for the other. Richard creates an alter ego called Max, Sarah adopts this "Max" as her lover. Richard appears to be controlling a counterpoint. Sarah has to comply with Richard's wishes and thus they invent two erotic characters in order to revive their marriage.

The reversion to role-playing is the product of biological drives embedded within the two characters:

The conclusion presents two people who have finally awakened to their deepest desires. They have found, among other things, an atavistic violence as part of their sexuality, a violence in which one is master and the other mastered. (Hollis, 1970: 68)

Sarah plays at having more than one lover, as if to needle Richard into sexual response:

Sarah: Do you think he's the only one who comes! Do you? Do you think he's the only one I entertain? Hmmnn? Don't be silly. I have other visitors all the time. I receive all the time. (p.193)

Richard admits having an affair with a whore, but not that he has a liaison with another woman:

Richard: But I haven't got a mistress. I'm very well acquainted with a whore, but I haven't got a mistress. (p.168)

His attitude to whores is that they are not worth talking about. Their only function is to "express and engender lust with all lust's cunning. Nothing more." (p.169). By knowing that Sarah is the whore he is talking about, we realize that Richard is playing a sadistic role. He is expressing his sexuality through Max to Sarah in her role as a whore, something he cannot do while he is Richard. He acts a ham-fisted Jekyll and Hyde with her. In the morning he is

Richard, in the afternoon he is Max, and in the evening he is Richard again. He, as husband Richard, cannot express his passion in the way he wants, because he *respects* his wife. As Max, he allows himself to release this sadistic energy on whore Sarah. He tells her why he was having an affair with the whore:

Why? I wasn't looking for your double, was I? I wasn't looking for a woman I could respect, as you, whom I could admire and love, as I do you. Was I? (p.169.)

Pinter here raises the issue of what outlandish pacts sexual conventions can admit. Do we respect a woman as a wife or whore; do we respect them as the two in one? We know from the text that Sarah is not deceiving Richard and that Richard does not gull her:

Looked at existentially...no woman is essentially wife or essentially whore. She is potentially either or both at once...Personality is not something given; it is fluid. (Kerr: 32)

As with most Pinter comedies, this can be interpreted as straight reality or twisted fantasy. Richard wants to maintain respect for Sarah but pursue a sadistic relationship with a woman for hire. How long can they continue deceiving themselves by satisfying eros at the expense of respectable psyche?

The action "plays on the theme of the unknowability of man". (Gabbard: 164) This coexists with man's continuing development. He is, therefore, 'what he is next'. (Kerr: 30). Richard realizes in Act II that they should stop acting. He feels guilty and he wants to switch off his fantasy as Max. He is looking for sexual satisfaction, but cannot find it with Sarah as a wife; he needs her as a prostitute. The game is now out of control. By stopping it, he would destroy their marriage, a marriage where his erotic desires have failed. Sarah does not want the game to be stopped, she tells him:

Sarah: I want to whisper something to you. Listen. Let me whisper to you. Mmm? Can I? Please? It's whispering time. Earlier it was teatime, wasn't it?

Now it's whispering time.

(Pause)

You like me to whisper to you. You like me to love you, whispering. Listen. You mustn't worry about...wives, husbands, things like that. (p.171)

She knows that their afternoon erotic meetings are keeping their marriage sound. She finds sexual satisfaction, and the chance to give Richard a dream world to practise his erotic dreams. This could be fulfilled by the husband \ wife polarity. But they find sexual satisfaction as lover and whore.

Max and his whore are dream images in the minds of Richard and Sarah. So: Richard and Sarah become their true selves and Max and his whore stay figments of their imagination? Perhaps the reckless lover and the promiscuous female represent their real selves, at a deeper stratum of reality. (Esslin: 140-1)

Richard agrees to continue the game after an erotic performance by Sarah to convince him to stay as Max, while she changes her clothes for him. Clothes here symbolize the change of personality; she does not change herself, but she changes her clothes, as he does, to be Max. They switch to Max and the whore by simply changing their clothes to look more desirable in the eyes of the partner:

Sarah: It's a very late tea. Isn't it? But I think I like it. Aren't you sweet? I've never seen you before after sunset. My husband's at a late-night conference. Yes you look different. Why are you wearing this strange suit, and this tie? You usually wear something else don't you? Take off your jacket. Mmmm? Would you like me to change? Would you like me to change my clothes? I'll change for you, darling. Shall I? Would you like that? (p.183)

His answer, "Yes, change, you lovely whore," (p.184) show the intrepid indulgence of his inner desires. Max now controls him, and he is aware of that take-over by Max, allowing him to release the erotic will hidden in his subconscious:

Pinter also dramatizes that Richard is seized by an additional need, one that these particular games do not satisfy. He needs to be in command of the marriage, to have power over his wife. When Sarah is pleased that all is in balance, she implies that she and Richard are equals, but at that point he becomes dissatisfied and rejects the game, so as to rob her of her release and to subjugate her to the conventions of marriage. (Cahn: 52).

The play could be a dream created by Richard and Sarah and may only exist in their minds. So, within this dream they fulfil their hidden wishes, which would otherwise threaten their lives as a couple. The play explores the dual. Who is real? Max or Richard? Sarah or the prostitute? Which partnership is real to us, the respectable husband and wife, or the lover and the whore? These questions are to be answered in any Pinter play. *The Lover* is a muscular scrutiny of sexuality which illuminates facts about human beings. We try to escape from a socially fixed framework into an underworld of fantasy, to satisfy our black desires:

It is a conflict between tamed, socialised and wild instinct – dominated humanity on a vast epic scale." (Esslin: 141).

This sex war between husband and wife is expressed fully in Pinter's *Old Times* (1971). Here the battle is for physical possession. The three characters in this play exist in the present and in the past. Deeley (the husband) and Kate (the wife) live in a remote farmhouse near the sea. They talk about the visit of Kate's friend, Anna. Kate and Anna have not seen each other for twenty years, since they were living together in a flat in London, working as secretaries. This visit may be seen as a dream in Kate's mind and Anna is only her passionate self. Anna, if part of Kate, may be the aspiration for a homosexual relationship that has occurred in the past:

Moreover, the story allows Pinter to identify Anna as an aspect – her passionate self, from which she has retreated in her heterosexual, domestic relationship with Deeley. (Ganz: 173)

Deeley uses this sex confrontation to enforce his power over Kate, who at the beginning of the play, seems enigmatic and accepts such domination. Anna, if we believe that she is not an invention of Kate's mind, is trying to regain Kate as she possessed her twenty years ago.

The women had a Lesbian relationship, but Kate stopped it by marrying Deeley, an apparent flight from homo-to heterosexuality. Kate was hardly satisfied in her relationship with Anna:

Deeley: Did 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 of something, you can't say

it's the best of anything. (*Old Times*: 43).

Deeley tries to stress that Anna is her best friend, but Kate denies the word 'best'. Kate's last statement probably includes Deeley as well as Anna. He is the only person she has right now, so he is not the 'best' partner she could have. The intended visit by Anna is a threat to Deeley's relationship with Kate. He is afraid of being abandoned; Kate may desire to reinstate her gay affair:

Deeley: Are you looking forward to seeing her?

Kate: No.

Deeley: I am. I shall be very interested.

Kate: In what?

Deeley: In you. I'll be watching you.

Kate: Me? Why?

Deeley: To see if she's the same person.

Kate: You think you'll find that out through me.

Deeley: Definitely. (Pp.7-8)

Perhaps, then, Deeley suspects Kate's infidelity. He aims to find reality through Kate's reaction to Anna. Deeley fears leaving Kate and Anna alone. He stays with them all through the incidents narrated by the play text. He is afraid that homosexuality may take over from heterosexuality and then he would be left alone. Sex is to Deeley, as to Pinter's stagecraft, a source of power and domination. Anna wants to dominate Kate by trying to seduce her back to homosexuality. Anna's theft of Kate's underwear connotes a Lesbian allurements. The struggle between Deeley and Anne is to subjugate Kate.

Deeley, the only man in the play, wields his power as a masculine force by extruding his sexuality. He may want a sexual ride with both women. Deeley says at the beginning that he wished he had met them before. We realise that he never met Anne. Their meeting suggests erotic allure; He looks up her skirt. Deeley always identifies Anne with Kate. Here we have a tantalizing double-exposure:

Deeley: If it was her skirt, if it was her.

Anna: (coldly) Oh, it was my skirt, it was me.

I remember your look.very well.

I remember you well.

Kate: (to Anna) but I remember you. I remember you dead (p.67.)

In Kate's rebellion against homosexuality (Act II,) she tells her story about a man in their room and that she plastered his face with dirt from a window box:

He was bemused, aghast, resisted, resisted with force. He could not let me dirty his face, or smudge it, he wouldn't let me. He suggested a wedding instead, and a change of environment.

(Slight pause.)

He asked me once, at about that time, who had slept in that bed before him. I told him no one. No one at all. (p.69)

Kate succeeds in leaving Lesbianism for a heterosexual bond:

These are the last words. This last speech seems to me a figurative but resonant statement of the pain that Kate had felt twenty years before in leaving a lesbian lover for a husband, with the dirt as a (puritanical) metaphor of the lesbianism. (Kauffmann, 1974: 40)

Kate selects herself as an individual, refusing to be dominated by anyone. She sits on her divan, with Anna lying on it, defeated and Deeley sitting on the armchair apart from the sofas, awaiting Kate's decision. She has killed the memory of her double ego (Anna) and been drawn to homosexuality. At the same time she has refused to submit to Deeley's masculine will.

Old Times is a play about self and inner self. An escape through sexuality, from the fears of loneliness. Each one of us has irrational aspects in his or her personality. We are vulnerable to fears of morality. Whether we accept it or not, we cannot escape such dread. We are vulnerable to sex with its twin manifestations. Sex has power over us and changes our lives by shifting from one gender enticement to another in the varied catalogue of those over whom we drool.

The sexual vulnerability in us, imminent as the vulnerability to death, acknowledged or not, struggled against or submitted to, is what Pinter has circumscribed in this play. (Kauffmann: 41)

CONCLUSION

Pinter believes that there is no explanation for human actions or incidents affecting humans. There is no 'because' or 'why'? Things happen and they will continue to happen. This is the praxis of being. There is another man inside every man and another woman inside every woman. Although we don't know when that man/woman will take control, we shape them in the way we like others to observe them. Life and human beings are more mysterious than we think. If we put them on stage, we expose their misery and their depth.

So what have *Old Times* and *The Lover* added to our knowledge of Pinter's stagecraft? Perhaps little is innovative here. Yet the thin under lip of scorn is evident in these powerful playlets for small cast.

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