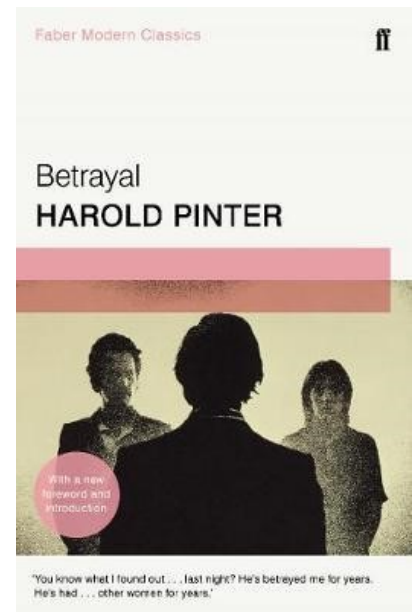


# ***Betrayal***

Harold Pinter

**“uncovers the precipice  
under everyday prattle  
and forces entry  
into oppression's  
closed rooms”**



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## A Brief Author Biography



### Early Life

Writer and political activist Harold Pinter is most famous for his plays. Inspired in part by Samuel Beckett, he created his own distinctive style, marked by terse dialogue and meaningful pauses. He was the son of a Jewish tailor and grew up in a lower middle-class neighborhood in London. In his grammar school years, Pinter was athletic and especially fond of playing cricket.

During World War II, Pinter saw some of the bombing of his city by the Germans. He was sent away to escape the Blitz at one point. This firsthand experience of war and destruction left a lasting impression on Pinter. At the age of 18, he refused to enlist in the military as part of his national service. A conscientious objector, he ended up paying a fine for not completing his national service.

Pinter started out as an actor. After studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art for a time, he worked in regional theater in the 1950s and sometimes used the stage name David Baron. Pinter wrote a short play, *The Room*, in 1957, and went on to create his first full-length drama, *The Birthday Party*. *The Birthday Party* premiered in London in 1958 to savage reviews, and closed within a week. One critic, Harold Hobson of *The Sunday Times of London*, offered a dissenting opinion, writing that Pinter was "the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London," according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

### Major Works

With 1960's *The Caretaker*, Pinter had his first taste of success. The play is about two brothers who

bring home a homeless man to live with them—a man who then exerts a strange hold over the brothers. The play, like many of Pinter's works, conveys "a world of perplexing menace," and in it Pinter uses "a vocabulary all his own," as a critic for *The New York Times* once explained.

*The Homecoming* (1965), considered by some to be his masterwork, explored familial tensions. In the play, a man brings his wife to meet his father and brothers after a long estrangement. The wife ends up leaving him to stay with his family. The drama moved to Broadway in 1967 and won a Tony Award—Pinter's only Broadway honor. *The Homecoming* was later turned into a film featuring many of its original cast, including Ian Holm, Terence Rigby and Vivien Merchant. Pinter had met

Merchant when he was working as an actor, and the couple had married in 1956.

Around this time, Pinter also branched out into film, writing the screenplays for his own works as well as the works of others. He wrote *The Servant* (1963) and *Accident* (1967), both directed by Joseph Losey and starring Dirk Bogarde. Losey and Pinter worked together on one more film—1970's *The Go-Between*, starring Julie Christie and Alan Bates. Perhaps one of Pinter's best-known screen adaptations was 1981's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, starring Jeremy Irons and Meryl Streep.

In 1978, Pinter brought to the stage another of his best-regarded works, the drama *Betrayal*. This tale of infidelity and marital meltdown seemed to reflect the writer's life in some ways, in particular his affair with TV personality Joan Blakewell. He was later involved with Lady Antonia Fraser who was married to a member of Parliament and a mother of six. The pair were eventually able to shed their respective spouses and married in 1980. Pinter and Fraser, a talented writer in her own right, became a very popular couple in literary circles.

Pinter's politics became more explicit in his late works. The short play *Mountain Language* (1988), for instance, was written

to highlight the mistreatment of the Kurdish people in Turkey. He and fellow playwright Arthur Miller had visited Turkey together a few years earlier.

### Death and Legacy

After being diagnosed with cancer in 2001, Pinter continued his writing and activism. He decried Britain's involvement in the Iraq War, and he called both U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair "terrorists," according to the *Financial Times*. Pinter expressed some of his outrage in his poetry, particularly his 2003 collection, *WAR*. In a poem entitled "God Bless America," he wrote: "Here they go again / The Yanks in their armoured parade / Chanting their ballads of joy / As they gallop across the big world / Praising America's God / The gutters are clogged with the dead." These political reflections helped Pinter earn the Wilfred Owen Award for poetry.

In 2005, Pinter was honored with the Nobel Prize for Literature. The selection committee cited Pinter a writer "who, in his plays, uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms." Some saw the choice of Pinter, an antiwar campaigner, as a political statement. He wasn't well enough to accept the prize in person, and he gave his Nobel lecture in a pre-recorded video

played at the event.

Pinter succumbed to cancer on December 24, 2008. He was survived by his second wife, writer Antonia Fraser, his son from his first marriage, Daniel, and his six stepchildren.

Pinter's work has inspired and informed generations of playwrights, especially Tom Stoppard and David Mamet. Pinter's plays are still performed around the world, with new audiences experiencing the distinct, strange and foreboding atmosphere so often created by the late writer. Of Pinter, fellow playwright David Hare once said, "The essence of Pinter's singular appeal is that you sit down to every play he writes in certain expectation of the unexpected," according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

[<https://www.biography.com/people/harold-pinter-9441163>]

## An introduction to *Betrayal*

**In Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*, an affair and its revelation are portrayed in reverse chronological order. William McEvoy explores how this reversal focuses our attention on the ways in which meaning and knowledge are constructed, and on the ability of language to hide as much as it reveals.**

First performed on 15 November 1978 at the National Theatre in London, *Betrayal* was Harold Pinter's seventh full-length play. Martin Esslin says that it 'represents a major stylistic change, even something like a new beginning in Pinter's development as a playwright'. Up until that point, Pinter had been firmly associated with the 'Theatre of the Absurd', a term Esslin himself had coined to describe the work of writers such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco which subverted realism and staged the irrational instead. In plays such as *The Birthday Party* (1958), *The Caretaker* (1960) and *The Homecoming* (1964), Pinter had offered audiences often working-class characters trapped in threatening scenarios – 'comedies of menace' as they were famously dubbed – in which motives were unexplained and violence simmered beneath the surface.

From the 1970s onwards, with plays such as *Old Times* (1971), Pinter's work shifted gear away from absurdist paranoia to tackle questions of memory and its unreliability. Often paired with *Betrayal*, *Old Times* features three characters, Deeley, Anna and

Kate, negotiating different versions of their shared past. We cannot even be sure whether Anna is alive or dead, a ghost, a memory or a guilty projection of Kate's or Deeley's unconscious. The play marks the transition from the existential enigmas of Pinter's earlier work to texts that deal with how perception is subjective and memory can be manipulated.

So what leads Esslin to call *Betrayal* a 'major stylistic change'? In many ways, it is a much more conventional play than Pinter's earlier works. It features a middle-class love-triangle in the form of two men and a woman, Jerry, his best friend Robert and Robert's wife Emma, who are, as Robert Clyman puts it, 'stylized variations on characters we already know from the more densely coded genre of realism'. We learn about an extra-marital affair, watch the characters as they pursue it, lie about it and find out about it; and feel a strong undertow of regret and guilt as passions cool and the chilly realities of betrayal leave their imprint.

What Esslin is alerting us to is the way *Betrayal* completely transforms our role as readers and spectators by recounting the events largely in reverse chronological order, starting with the end of the affair between Jerry and Emma, and taking us, over the course of nine scenes, back to its beginning. When we first see Jerry and Emma in Scene 1, set in a pub in 1977, we quickly note their

reticence about speaking, and the way their words mirror one another:

Jerry: Well.

Emma: How are you?

Jerry: All right.

Emma: You look well.

Jerry: Well, I'm not all that well, really.

The word 'well' occurs four times in five lines, as if they are looking for ways to open communication but have to resort to a repeated word to fill the gap. As the scene continues, the two characters enter into a complex game of tentative self-exposure, testing each other's emotional boundaries, not sure but wanting to know how the other feels without betraying their own vulnerability to rejection or indifference.

The play progresses in a series of snapshots from the previous nine years, its overall arc taking us back to 1968, when the affair began. The reverse chronology is not smooth though: three scenes take us slightly forward a month or two in a specific year, while the time gap between the scenes sometimes extends to three years (as in the final Scenes, 8 and 9). The overall effect is a rhythm of crisis and dilation and a temporal instability as the past is reconstructed for us. What emerges is a sense that all of the characters have betrayed each other: husbands have betrayed wives and vice versa, friends have betrayed friends, by conspiracy or omission, sometimes

thoughtlessly, sometimes out of love.

In Enoch Brater's words, in *Betrayal*, '[i]t is not so much what we know but when we know it that is responsible for the real tension'. More than this, the play is about how our knowledge exceeds, equates to or lags behind the characters'. As spectators, we observe scenes throughout with the unrealistic foreknowledge of how things will end. Rarely has dramatic irony, where the audience know more than the characters, been used to such devastating effect.

Arguably then, the play is as much about our role as readers as it is about themes such as friendship, 'homosociality' (i.e. relationships between men, often mediated by their relationships with women) and sexual power games. Indeed, for Clyman, the time-reversal 'dispels the illusion of real life' altogether. Instead, it focusses our attention on how 'certain scenes have been carefully chosen for presentation'. In other words, despite its realist frame, *Betrayal* is meta-theatrical and meta-linguistic, making us think about how meaning is constructed or fabricated and about how the very same words can mean entirely different things to different people depending on what pre-knowledge they bring to a situation. We end up focussing less on what the characters do or say, on the moral rights and wrongs of their actions, and concentrate instead on the power of language to confess or conceal,

to seduce or to wound, to threaten or to intimidate.

One upshot of this shift of focus onto the plane of language is that the characters no longer seem like real people but are more like 'vehicles in a kind of information game'. Pinter has told us how their story ends, so we focus instead on decoding their double-meanings, where everyday exchanges are tense with subtext because we know what happens in the future. In Scene 3, set in 1975, when Jerry says to Emma 'I don't think we don't love each other', the double negative claims our attention because we have just witnessed the frostiness of their relationship two years down the line. Even more striking is the way Pinter is able to generate alarm via language which, out of context, seems perfectly mundane. All Jerry has to do at the end of Scene 7 is ask Robert 'How is Emma?' and because we know Robert has just found out about Jerry's affair with his wife but Jerry isn't aware of this (and won't be for another four years), the question sends a jolt through us.

The characters' dialogue is full of digressions, evasions and contradictions, to the extent that the drama of this play occurs at the micro-level of syntax, through subtext, ellipses and pauses, rather than at the macro-level of plot revelations, climaxes and resolutions.

In Pinter's essay 'Writing for the

Theatre' from 1976, he says:

*So often, below the word spoken, is the thing known and unspoken. My characters tell me so much and no more ... most of the time we're inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling. But it's out of these attributes that a language arises. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said.*

Pinter's *Betrayal* is full of this kind of subtext, and he has given us the key with which to decode it. It is a play which teaches us that words have histories, even silences have histories, and to be attuned to these. It leads us to think about dialogue in relation to intersubjectivity. What we say – and how we say it – is shaped by how we expect our words will be interpreted, whether we think we will be interrupted, whether we want the other person to speak first and so on. For Pinter, a listener's actions, a flinch, a sigh, a gesture, will have an impact on a speaker's words, and in *Betrayal*, the director's great challenge is to capture how Pinter's elliptical dialogue registers the complex verbal and non-verbal cues characters give one another about their emotional states.

Peter Hall, who directed Michael Gambon, Penelope Wilton and Daniel Massey in the 1978 premiere of the play, has said that Pinter's writing 'allows him to explore the instinctive hostilities between human beings. They fight duels not with swords, but

with words and silences'. But this is only part of the story in *Betrayal*. The play reverses beginnings and endings. The first scene ends with Emma's words 'It's all over', though our understanding at that stage of what lies behind the characters' tongue-tied zigzagging between intimacy and defensiveness is only just starting. The characters' hostility is shown to be far from instinctive but is revealed instead to be a compound of love, loss, regret and vulnerability. Pinter's great achievement in *Betrayal* is to make a detective story out of a play whose ending we know from the start. Instead of being absorbed by the events of the narrative, we become calculating analysers of language, complicit with the characters' lies, shocked by our perception of the way banal words can mask such powerful emotions and contain such painful ironies.

[<https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-betrayal>]



## Harold Pinter's Last Interview

**Harold Pinter [...] gave his last interview to Andy Bull, of *The Guardian*, on a subject very dear to the playwright's heart: cricket. Here we publish the interview for the first time.**

"I tend to think that cricket is the greatest thing that God created on earth," Harold Pinter once said, "certainly greater than sex, although sex isn't too bad either." No harm, then, that the game should be the subject of his last interview, given in late October at his home in London. His health failing, Pinter was in nostalgic mood, recalling a childhood in Hackney, east London, during the blitz and his time as an evacuee. "I first watched cricket during the war. At one point we were all evacuated from our house when there was an air raid. We opened the door and our garden, with this large lilac tree, was alight all along the back wall. We were evacuated straight away. Though not before I took my cricket bat.

"I used to get up at five in the morning and play cricket. I had a great friend who is still going – he lives in Australia – called Mick, Mick Goldstein. He used to live around the corner from me in Hackney, and we were very close to the River Lea, and there were fields. We walked down to the fields; there'd be nobody about – it would really very early in the morning, and there would be a tree we used as a wicket. We would take it in turns to bat and bowl; we would be Lindwall, Miller, Hutton and Compton. That

was the life."

Pinter's study was heavy with the clutter of a cricket fan. On one wall was an oil portrait of himself, wearing whites, knocking a drive away to the leg side. The shelves creaked under his cricket library, including all 145 editions of the *Wisden Almanack*. On the mantelpiece were photographs and memorabilia of the Gaieties, the wandering club side of which Pinter was captain, and, when he gave up playing, chairman. Downstairs, on the wall was a framed copy of WG Grace's autograph.

His favourite, though, was the England great Len Hutton. He first saw him as an evacuee in Yorkshire. "I was sent for a brief period to Leeds, and I went to see some kind of game up at Headingley. I caught Len Hutton, who was on leave from the army. I fell in love with him at first sight, as it were. I became passionate about Yorkshire because of Hutton really. It is my great regret that I could have met him, but I was too shy."

Cricket was not in Pinter's family. His father did not play. "I learned about the game at Hackney Downs Grammar. We used to play a lot. A lot of my colleagues at the time were very, very keen on cricket. We felt so intensely about it. I remember going to Lord's, walking through Regent's Park on my way, one early evening. And coming away from Lord's

there was another schoolboy, in uniform, and he saw me, and said: "Hutton's out!" I could have killed him. Really. It was very important to me that I was going to see Hutton. So, you see, I have golden memories."

His playing days lapsed after childhood and did not resume until he had a family of his own. "I didn't start playing again until the 60s. I took my son, who was then about nine, to school for nets and I watched him be coached. I suddenly thought 'well why don't I have a net myself?' I hadn't played since school you know, but the next week I got some whites and started to have some coaching from a fellow called Fred Pelozzi, a cricketer of Italian descent but he was a cockney actually, and he was a bloody good player.

"And after a few weeks he said 'why don't you come and play for the club I play for?' So I said 'OK'. I went out for my first game for Gaieties [batting] at I think No 6. He was the only fellow I knew, they were all new to me, and a fellow bowled the first ball at me, and I hit it plumb in the middle of the bat, really a beautiful shot. Straight back to the bowler, who caught it. So I was out first bloody ball. That was my first introduction to Gaieties. But I carried on playing for them, and eventually I became captain."

It was cricket's endless potential for narrative, the games within a game, that appealed most. "Drama happens in big cricket

matches. But also in small cricket matches," he said. "When we play, my club, each thing that happens is dramatic: the gasps that follow a miss at slip, the anger of an lbw decision that is turned down. It is the same thing wherever you play, really."

He had been looking forward to seeing England play Australia next summer. "I don't watch as much professional cricket as I used to, because I'm not moving very well these days, but I used to do a lot of it. And there is nothing better really. I had a piece of very good fortune three years ago and I managed to get a box at Lord's. I was there to see South Africa last year, and I shall certainly be there next year to see the Ashes.

"I don't know whether it is the same game these days. But I have a number of step-grandchildren, three boys. And they think of nothing else but cricket. They play cricket in the snow. So it is still very much alive actually. I think the facilities have been denuded, and there are now all the other beguilements of sport, and this obsession with bloody football. But my grandchildren still they get up at five in the morning and play cricket, just as I did myself.

"Cricket, the whole thing, playing, watching, being part of the Gaieties, has been a central feature of my life."

[<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/26/harold-pinter-final-interview>]

## A NOTE FROM CAMILA

I suggest that apart from reading the play, you also listen to it to hear the nuances of intonation and meaning. The dialogue is very pared down, the stage directions are minimal, so that the reader or theatergoer must recreate the underlying thoughts and motivations of the characters.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBERBIMmObs>



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