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Betrayal and The Last Years: Expanding Pinter Triangles to Include Contemporary Works

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Both Harold Pinter's play Betrayal *and Jason Robert Brown's musical* The Last Five Years *detail the unfortunate corrosion of relationships across time, showing how little decisions gradually amount to a larger betrayal.*

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Introduction

Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* (1978) is a play about an affair between Emma and Jerry, which takes place in reverse chronological order, following the affair backward in time until we see their first meeting. Emma's husband, Robert, is best friends with Jerry—both have known each other since college, when they were poetry editors. Jerry was the best man at Robert and Emma's wedding, and soon after that, he began a seven-year affair with Emma, which continued even after the birth of Emma and Robert's son, Ned.

The Last Five Years (2014) is a film based on the musical of the same name, written by Jason Robert Brown, which tells the story of Cathy and Jamie's opposing timelines: that is, the young actress and the novelist are moving through their five-year romantic relationship from different directions in time. The songs in this musical are sung alternately by Cathy and Jamie, and show different streams of time. Cathy's musical narrative operates in reverse chronological order, starting when she finds Jamie's note ending their marriage, and finishing with their first date in the far past. Jamie's musical narrative, however, moves forward through time, beginning when he meets Cathy and gains success as a novelist, and ending when he has multiple affairs and leaves her. The musical ends in a duet, and young Cathy's upbeat "Goodbye Until Tomorrow" clashes with an older Jamie's "I Could Never Rescue You," where he sings what he writes in his farewell note.

Both *Betrayal* and *The Last Five Years* detail the unfortunate corrosion of relationships and the little decisions that gradually amount to a larger betrayal. In her article, "The sacred joke: comedy and politics in Pinter's early plays," Francesca Coppa stresses the importance of love triangles and other triangular relationships in Pinter's works; triangular arrangements are seen in both works, and feature assumed and unexpected alliances. In *Betrayal*, Emma's affair with Jerry competes with her marriage to Robert, as well as with the homosocial relationship between Jerry and Robert. Although Robert discovers Emma and Jerry's affair, he still aligns himself with Jerry and maintains their friendship. In *The Last Five Years*, despite there being only two main characters, there are still competing third interests to Cathy and Jamie's relationship, including Jamie's career and extramarital affairs.

In any relationship, partners are expected to form an alliance and bond with each other. When a third party threatens that bond, the power can dramatically shift if the original alliance is not prioritized. An

unexpected alliance can then occur with this third party, leaving one partner excluded. Expected alliances in triangles are ones that audiences can predict: i.e. the married couple in *Betrayal* or *The Last Five Years*. An unexpected alliance in these stories would be Emma's relationship with Jerry, or Jerry and Robert's relationship, which is threatened by and often seeks to exclude Emma. In both cases, the expected alliance between married partners is shattered, allowing the audience to feel surprised or even isolated, just as these characters do.

Worlds of Alliances and Isolation: Love Triangles

Coppa connects Pinter's relationship triangles to the triangles of Sigmund Freud's joke theory, where three people are required for the success of comedy: one person to tell a joke, another to be the victimized object of a joke, and one person to laugh. There is no neutral position in these roles: if someone laughs, they align themself with the joke-telling aggressor; if they do not laugh, they align themself with the victim of the joke. Coppa argues that Pinter's early plays are constructed like jokes, explaining that "We may not, in the final event, find the larger work *funny*, but that does not mean that the play is not constructed like a joke. Rather, our failure to laugh may be an indication that we, the audience, have come to side (or have been *taught* to side) with the victim over the victimiser" (Coppa 46). This structure allows for the play to end with one person isolated, and depending on how the audience aligns themselves, the power can abruptly shift from the expected alliances.

This structure of alliances and isolation holds true for *Betrayal*, where Emma becomes the isolated one, estranged from both her husband Robert and her lover Jerry—whereas Robert and Jerry remain strong friends, despite everything, throughout. In an interview with the cast of the 2019 *Betrayal* revival, Zawe Ashton, who plays Emma, says that her character is the one people often blame, and she notes, "I think people go away seeing the play from each one of our perspectives and maybe align themselves with one. I get a lot of 'It was all your fault!' at the end of the play" (Playbill). When looking at themes of affairs, audiences look to place fault on one character; in this case, it was Emma.

The Last Five Years leaves the audience with a similar sentiment, encouraging the audience to root for Cathy over Jamie, as she is the one scorned by Jamie's betrayal. In the first song, "Still Hurting," Anna Kendrick, who plays Cathy, sings, "Jamie is over and Jamie is gone / Jamie's decided it's time to move on," placing blame on her husband for making the decision to end their marriage.

Pinter, as a playwright, "does not seem to be interested in detailing the particular reasons why his characters act as they do—instead, he seems content to confront us with their unknowability" (Coppa 52). Similarly, Brown does not answer the audience's questions about why or how Jamie could have done things differently. It's the same suggestion Pinter makes, that "human beings have depths that can only become evident in moments of dramatic or comedic crisis" (Coppa 52). In this dramatic crisis, we see how complicated both Cathy and Jamie's feelings are when it comes to the decline of their relationship.

In Cathy's second song, "See I'm Smiling," she addresses his workplace alliances: "You can be here with me or be there with them / As usual, guess which you pick?" The triangle is evident in this song: Cathy versus Jamie and his career. Jamie says he has to go to a Random House Publishing party, which we see happen numerous times throughout the film. The implication that the "them" from Cathy's song is the people at the party complicates as the musical unfolds. What we, as the audience, do not know yet is that he has already chosen to break up with Cathy; his affairs with other women—including his Random House editor Alise, and his receptionist—are only revealed later on, in the song "Nobody Needs to Know." In "A Miracle Would Happen," Jeremy Jordan as Jamie sings, "Cause she knows, they always know," meaning Cathy's intuition was right.

The playwrights purposefully misalign these characters in both works, preparing audiences for unhappy endings. *Betrayal* begins its second scene with a conversation between Jerry and Robert. What the audience may expect is that these two men can no longer be friends because of having shared Emma, but the opposite occurs. They bond against Emma, allying against her latest lover, Casey. Jerry says, "He's put on weight," to which Robert responds "Yes, I thought that" (Pinter 187). This agreement to make fun of Casey, who is now having an affair with Emma, shows their allegiance to each other was always more important than

their allegiance to her. The future for these two does not include Emma, as the affair between Emma and Jerry is over and Robert has decided to end his marriage after all.

The Effect of Reverse Chronological Order

Betrayal and *The Last Five Years* detail the unfolding of competing alliances over the course of different affairs. The unique aspect of both of these works is that they are told in reverse chronological order. *Betrayal* begins in 1977 with Emma and Jerry meeting for a drink some time after their affair has ended. For Cathy in *The Last Five Years*, her story begins after Jamie's story has ended in "Still Hurting." Reverse chronological timelines exist both to disorient the audience and to stack the revelations of taut experiences like affairs. This dramatic effect then becomes an eye-opening process of revelations and emotional turbulence, which mirrors the similarly disorienting characteristic of affairs.

In his essay, "Looking Backward: Reversible Time in Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* Screenplay," W. Russel Gray characterizes the backwards timeline of *Betrayal* as a vortex: "At the end of *Betrayal,* as we have seen, the pivotal characters are literally back where they—more precisely their affair—started… Appreciating the film's subtlety requires us to conceive of a figure more complex than a triangle; the dimensions of Pinter's theme are better visualized as a vortex" (Gray 149). This shape represents the complexity of Pinter's *Betrayal*, especially in how this affects the climax of the play.

The climax occurs when Emma and Robert are in Italy, and Robert finds out about Emma's affair with Jerry. This occurs after Robert questions Emma about a piece of mail she has received which he recognizes has been addressed to her in Jerry's handwriting. What follows is a series of questions that try to prod her to admit to the affair until she finally confesses, "We're lovers" (Pinter 222). Robert responds, "Ah. Yes. I thought it might be something like that, something along those lines…" (Pinter 222). This calm reaction, or rather lack of reaction, from Robert, embodies a type of restrained anger, where he gains control not becoming angry or violent with her.

The audience has already learned that Robert came to find out about the affair, since we have already seen a conversation between them that happens later in the timeline, after Italy. Jerry asks Robert, "And she told you… last night… about her and me. Did she not?" (Pinter 181). Robert responds, "No, she didn't. She didn't tell me about you and her last night. She told me four years ago… I thought you knew that" (Pinter 181-182). But Jerry didn't know that Robert knew about his affair with Emma. When Robert says, "She said you didn't. But I didn't believe that" (Pinter 182), this is a dig at Emma and Jerry's closeness. Robert feels that Emma and Jerry are allied against him and he feels isolated from them.

The rest of the conversation ends when Jerry, still stunned, states, "I was your best friend" (Pinter 183). This points to the strong connection that they share for the majority of the play. The friendship had its ups and downs: they stopped playing squash together regularly, which was a sign of something wrong, and now in this scene, their trust has been more openly broken now that the truth about Emma and Jerry's affair has come out as well as Robert's knowledge of it. This friendship, once fractured, can be put together through this play's rewinding of their history.

In an article about the 2019 *Betrayal* revival, Paul Taylor explains how effective telling the story backward is: "By reversing the chronology, virtually everything is seen in the shadow of disillusion and treachery is foretold. Pinter sensitizes us to the labyrinthine, corrosive nature of betrayal" (Taylor 3). The corrosive nature of betrayal can be seen in the way that lying is common, trust is broken, and relationships fall apart within the story. In a way, Pinter is using the reversal of timelines to comment on his own lack of faith and his reservations towards commitment, especially since this play was written after his divorce from Vivien Merchant and his own affair with Joan Bakewell.

W. Russel Gray describes Pinter's innovation of reversal of time: "No aspect of Harold Pinter's writing

is more imaginative than his manipulation of time, which is by no means limited to his trademark silences between and within bits of dialogue" (Gray 146). The effect is that "viewers of *Betrayal* must adjust to disorientating temporal shifts" (Gray 146), which ready them to be skeptical about the truth and to expect the unexpected.

The rewinding of history can also be seen in *The Last Five Years* when the audience witnesses the "conscious deliberate mistakes" ("Nobody Needs to Know") in Jamie's forward timeline, which contrasts Cathy's side of the story as hers is in reverse. In "Performing Jason Robert Brown's The Last Five Years," David Sucharski details this effect in relation to other works: "*The Last Five Years* is certainly not alone among movies, plays, and musicals in adopting a non-linear storyline. However, what is unique about this particular piece is the division of the plot into two, almost perfectly symmetrical, divergent storylines" (Sucharski 22). The non-linear plot mirrors that of *Betrayal* in how it communicates its story and the alliances within.

In an article about *The Last Five Years*, Stephanie Cohen describes how the "two trajectories meet in the middle when he proposes to her, then continue on their opposite courses. The show ends with Cathy's giddy goodbye to Jamie after their first date, and with Jamie's final goodbye to his ex-wife" (Cohen 2). As two separate trajectories, Cathy and Jamie are completing opposite journeys, meeting like passing trains in the song "The Next Ten Minutes." This song shows a romantic proposal and soaring duet that culminates in Cathy's side of the conversation, which is heard at the beginning of Jamie's part. This turns the timeline again, with Jamie's part coming after their wedding and Cathy's part before.

Jason Robert Brown explained in an NPR interview how he thought of this dramatic use of time: "It came to me on a subway platform that if she were going backward and he was going forwards, that we'd know what the end of the story was, but we would always be a little bit struggling with them… I thought that psychologically made sense to me, that felt like what it was to be at the end of a marriage" (NPR Staff). The affinity that the audience can then feel while deciding what is true and what is not, is effective in specifically these works: ones about heartbreak, betrayal, and lies.

Reverse chronological order is effective because Pinter and Brown understand the heart of their works. The disorientation of affairs is communicated through the audience's stake in finding out the truth. Through the slow reveal of knowledge, as the story is told backward, audiences know how it ends and not how it starts. The literature surrounding this technique supports its effectiveness in communicating the alliances located in love triangles. Without intentionally utilizing Pinter's method of using triangles, Brown's reverse chronological order exemplifies key aspects of Pinter triangles: both expected and unexpected alliances, the audience's ability to sympathize with the victim rather than the victimizer, and, content-wise, the disorienting nature of affairs and truth-telling.

The Last Five Years: Characters

The very idea of characters, while acknowledging that they may or may not be based on real life, is that they are fictional. This means that their entire beings are controlled by their creators. *Betrayal* and *The Last Five Years* are about flawed characters who are doomed to fail in their relationships—which is a successful execution of a plot about failed relationships. In these works, the characters take on roles in a Pinter triangle: one person must be the aggressor, one person the victim, and one person the ally (whether that be to the aggressor or victim). The characters also play these roles in *The Last Five Years*.

The Last Five Years' main conflict is the trajectory of Cathy and Jamie's relationship. It begins at the end, and ends at the beginning, creating a circular understanding, or vortex, in which it is trapped in itself. Cathy is written to be a failing actress. No matter how talented Cathy is, no matter how hard she works, and no matter how much she tries to succeed, she must fail in comparison to Jamie. This was how she was written, this is how the story must go. Jamie, however, becomes a successful novelist at 24, but at what cost? Brown poses this question to the audience via the play's plot structure, balancing their relationship with the upward trend of his career. As his career soars, their relationship suffers. As Jamie's fame grows, his reliance on Cathy declines, so that he spends more time with his Random House colleagues, eventually leading to his affairs.

In an interview about the film, Anna Kendrick describes her fatalism about the story: "I wanted to

make sure Cathy was equally culpable because it's just a doomed relationship. It's not anybody's fault, necessarily" (Kendrick). In a sense, Brown shows us that there is no other way the story can end, as it is about the eventual decline of a relationship between two people who are constantly at odds with each other because of their third player: Jamie's career.

Jamie's career overshadows Cathy and her own career. Jamie's self-absorption becomes a dominant trend throughout the story, culminating in the song, "Nobody Needs to Know." Jamie sings about resenting Cathy and wanting to be selfish, to control his own wishes and chase ambition no matter the cost. In this triangle of relationships, Jamie aligns himself with his career over Cathy. He sings, "All that I ask for / Is one little corner / One private room / At the back of my heart / Tell her I found one / She sends out battalions / To claim it and blow it apart / I grip and she grips / And faster we're sliding / Sliding and spilling / And what can I do?" The affair, which he has with Alise and two other women, turns Jamie against Cathy. Brown shows us his alliance with others without describing a motive or reason, just resentment against a partner who won't let him have "one private room at the back of my heart."

***Betrayal*: Pinter's Affair**

As a theme in Pinter's works, affairs are central to the idea of triangular relationships. However, in *Betrayal*, the idea of an affair moves beyond just one room and three characters. In "Pinter's *Betrayal* and the Comedy of Manners," Elin F. Diamond describes how the triangle in *Betrayal* moves beyond the confines of his earlier plays: "Emma, Robert, and Jerry move freely in the world, sharing a common language, common fears and desires, which their mutual betrayals confirm. As in former Pinter plays, it is impossible to verify the personal motives of the characters" (Diamond 244). By explicitly utilizing reverse chronological order to describe an affair, Pinter's "chronological shifts simplify our understanding of events and betray Pinter's usual preference for an unverifiable past" (Diamond 239). Not only does this simplify our understanding of events, but it also condenses the timeline of affairs to include only what will guide the audience into prioritizing knowledge and facts which will help them decide whose side they're on.

Extramarital affairs can be seen throughout Pinter's works as it "links three recurring themes: the impossibility of verification, the invasion of territory, and the masking of emotion in the deployment of language" (Diamond 239). These three aspects, as identified by Diamond, are exemplified in scene five, when Emma tells Robert of her affair with Jerry. Although it is impossible to verify Jerry's handwriting on the letter, much like Cathy's intuition, Robert's intuition of an affair is right.

The parallel tracking of memory and intuition can explain these three recurring themes according to Diamond: the impossibility of verification, the invasion of territory, and the masking of emotion in the deployment of language. Memory affects Robert's perception of his relationship with Emma, and the birth of their son. Robert also remembers Jerry's friendship differently once he learns about the affair. Before Emma admits the affair, he says to her:

> He used to write to me at one time. Long letters about Ford Madox Ford. I used to write to him too, come to think of it. Long letters about… oh, W. B. Yeats, I suppose. That was the time when we were both editors of poetry magazines. Him at Cambridge, me at Oxford. Did you know that? We were bright young men. And close friends. Well, we still are close friends. All that was long before I met you. Long before he met you (Pinter 220-221).

Robert is exerting possession over his memory of Jerry, saying they've been close friends since "long before I met you."

Robert's assertion that he and Jerry have been friends longer than he's been with Emma indicates his alliance with Jerry regardless of the affair. Pinter takes this aspect of an affair to be both psychological and

physical, and Elin Diamond writes on this topic, saying, "In *Betrayal,* Pinter goes further: not merely parodying adultery, he exposes it as domestic" (Diamond 240). Emma and Jerry do not just sneak around, as Robert says that would be impossible considering, "we've got two kids, he's got two kids, not to mention a wife…" (Pinter 223). Diamond continues:

> "Emma refers to the flat as a second home; we hear about the stew she cooks, the curtains and tablecloth she buys, her new apron. When Emma and Jerry reminisce about how inventive and imaginative they were, they mean how they financed the flat, how they found a way to spend the night—in other words, how they managed to seem married" (Diamond 240-241).

Not only do they share a place together, they are sharing the burden of financing this escape. Although they call it merely their "flat," this language masks the real emotion behind it.

The same can be said for *The Last Five Years*, where Sucharski describes both the reverse chronological order and its effect on the Pinter triangle to be the masking of emotion in the deployment of language: "It seems that in separating their storylines, Brown hopes to create a controlled environment in which both characters are able to live their lives and experience their world without the emotion of the other character coming into effect and obstructing their journey" (Sucharski 23). The timelines are environments, physical spaces, and solos where the characters can express their emotions and desires about the affair away from the other. In the same way, the scenes in *Betrayal* are separated into triangle alliances: Emma and Jerry, Emma and Robert, and Jerry and Robert, where each character can exist in their own storyline, their own version of the truth. Without the other characters obstructing their journeys, they can fulfill the inevitability of the affair by being in an unexpected alliance.

Conclusion

Exploring Pinter triangles in *Betrayal* and *The Last Five Years* leads to a discussion of how affairs can skew the perception of alliances. The dynamic between the three parties involved in a triangle can be complicated, with each person's emotions and motives influencing the others. This raises questions about how triangles, and their effect on the stories of affairs in both works, influence the choice to tell them in reverse chronological order. This timeline, unique to *Betrayal* and *The Last Five Years*, is intentionally created to confuse and disorient the audience. The use of triangles highlights the doomed nature of affairs, and shows how one person is always isolated in the end.

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