

Discordance in the scenes of moonlight



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Harold Pinter's *Moonlight*, discordant scenes create a state of transition for the characters, who are facing the death of family patriarch Andy.

Throughout the play, Pinter sets up scenes which would not fit logically into a linear story. Old friends reappear and converse with Andy, his wife and their two sons. A daughter, stuck at the age of 16, provides commentary from a "third area." Sons Fred and Jake deny the fact that their father is dying and ignore their mother's attempts to contact them. Pinter provides these scenes to suggest that death is a process of crossing a line — death will be a "new horizon" for Andy, as Bel (twice) suggests (p. 46) — but some lines crossed in the past can never be revisited. The first suggestion of discordance is marked by Maria's appearance to Jake and Fred when she describes, in a long speech, her relationships with Bel, Andy and her husband Ralph (p. 15). Although the stage directions suggest that she is speaking directly to Jake and Fred, her words suggest otherwise. They do not interrupt her as she openly reveals a long-standing "great affection" for Andy (p. 16). "How he danced," she says. "One of the great waltzers. An elegance and grace long gone. ... And he looked you directly in the eye. Unwavering. ... But I was young in those days" (p. 16). Maria, who has had affairs with both Andy and Bel, adds, "Your mother was marvelously young and quickening every moment. I — I must say — particularly when I saw your mother being swirled across the floor by your father — I felt buds breaking out all over the place" (p. 16-17). At the end of her monologue, Jake and Fred drop out of the scene entirely, and the play cuts again to Andy's bedroom. In fact, although Maria is speaking to the young men, there is no indication that they hear her, or are even aware that she has entered the scene. Considering the magnitude of what she is telling them, the sons would ordinarily be expected to react

her speech. Yet they ignore her as they continue to pretend that their father is not dying. Ralph, the next visitor to Jake and Fred, is aware that his entrance is equally nonsensical. He, like his wife, also speaks to them in a long tirade, receiving neither interruption nor response. He tells them that their father wasted his life as a “thinker,” drawing attention to the uncertainties in the play that cannot be clarified by analysis (p 28). He says, “What do you think this thinking is pretending to do? Eh? It’s pretending to make things clear, you see, it’s pretending to clarify things. But what’s it really doing? ... It’s confusing you, it’s blinding you, it’s sending the mind into a spin, it’s making you dizzy, it’s making you so dizzy that by the end of the day you don’t know whether you’re on your arse or your elbow, you don’t know whether you’re coming or going. (p. 28) Death in Moonlight similarly defies intellectual reasoning. If death is a new horizon, as Bel has suggested, “Is [it] endless? What’s the weather like?” (p. 46) Andy, the thinker, while dying, is searching for reassurance and certainty as the concepts become more difficult to grasp. A joint appearance of Ralph and Maria at Andy’s bedside is as equally unreliable as their previous visits to the sons. This time, however, the couple does entertain the reactions of the dying man and his wife — but the interaction does not seem to fit into the rest of the play. For instance, Andy tells Bel near the beginning of the play that he “bumped into Maria the other day, the day before [he] was stricken” and that she invited him to her flat for “a slice of plumduff” (p. 18). However, when she and Ralph appear at his deathbed, Maria says, “It’s been ages. We don’t live up here anymore, of course” (p. 68). Andy, therefore, may be imagining Maria, at one, or both, instances. More likely, however, they appear to be speaking from a gray area between reality and fantasy, appearing suddenly after Andy

and Bel have been talking about them; the dying man seems to have conjured them to him by thinking about his affair with Maria, Bel's affair with Maria, and his football games with Ralph, the referee. The stage directions are vague about when Maria and Ralph enter and where they are standing. And, when they arrive, Andy denies having a past with them. "I was a civil servant. I had no past. I remember no past. Nothing ever happened," he insists (p. 70). He doesn't behave as if he is in the presence of the woman "he can't die without" (p. 38). Maria and Ralph's entrance, therefore, serves as a direct analog to the new and uncertain "horizon" of death. Andy asks, "The big question is, will I cross [the horizon] as I die or after I'm dead?" (p. 46) As time passes in the play, Andy is crossing boundaries. Bridget too has crossed a boundary and it is unclear from where she is speaking; Andy's youngest daughter is cast in shadow both through stage lighting and through her cryptic monologues. In addition, although she is represented as only four years younger than her oldest brother in one scene (a flashback), she is 12 years younger than he is throughout the rest of the play. Bridget admits, "I am hidden. ... Hidden but free. No one in the world can find me" (p. 22). The assumption is that Bridget died at the age of 16. However, she is accessible now to Andy, who is also dying. Andy's last words address Bridget. After asking for his dead daughter throughout the play, wondering why she hasn't come to see him (and brought grandchildren that were never born), Andy asks Bel to "tell Bridget not to be frightened. Tell Bridget I don't want her to be frightened" (p. 76). He does not share the same anger over her absence at his deathbed that he harbors for Fred and Jake. Furthermore, Bridget says that her "task" is to see that her parents "sleep in peace and wake up rested. ... Because I know that when they look at me they see that I am all

they have left of their life” (p. 1). Bridget is, in fact, the tie that holds together the members of the family. The brothers dote on their younger sister. “Bridget would understand. I was her brother. She understood me. She always understood my feelings,” Fred says (p. 53). Jake adds, “She understood me too.” Bridget, however, is “hidden,” to her brothers when they need her the most. At the end of the play, Bridget provides a metaphor for the transition from life to death. She describes a house “bathed in moonlight. The house, the glade, the lane, were all bathed in moonlight. But the inside of the house was dark and all the windows were dark. ... I stood there in the moonlight and waited for the moon to go down” (p. 80). Bridget, frozen in time, has the first and last word in *Moonlight*, and she is speaking for Andy, waiting on his deathbed for enlightenment. Andy is not even sure if he is dying; “I don’t know how [dying] feels. How does it feel?” Andy asks Bel (p. 76). He has expressed doubt throughout the play, hypothesizing “Personally I don’t believe it’s going to be pitch black for ever because if it’s pitch black for ever what would have been the point of going through all these enervating charades in the first place?” (p. 46) The dying man only wants security, a “loophole,” that he will “meet [him]self coming back” (p. 46). Yet before he dies, he is able to reconnect with people in his past and, in a sense, confess before dying. (For instance, he finally tells Ralph that he was “certainly no bloody good” at being a referee [p. 69]). While waiting for his own life to end (his moon to go down), Andy still has a brief opportunity (the moonlight of his life) to make amends. Alongside scenes in Andy’s bedroom — but never crossing paths — Jake and Fred deny their father’s impending death, arguing instead about old friends and confidential meetings. A phone call they exchange with their mother is illogical. “Your

<https://assignbuster.com/discordance-in-the-scenes-of-moonlight/>

father is very ill,” Bel says to Jake. “ Chinese laundry?” Jake responds (p. 73). The exchange is repeated with Fred until Bel relents. “ It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter,” she says. “ Do you do dry cleaning?” (p. 74) She asks the question twice, and both times the sons respond as if they do indeed own a laundry and are not sitting in Fred’s room, pretending they have not recognized the voice of their own mother. Pinter captures the limitations of the past through Andy’s relationship with Jake and Fred; he can settle his relationship with Maria and Ralph, but his sons remain at a distance to him, even at the time of his death. The first time Jake refers to Andy, he says, “ My father weighed it all up carefully the day I was born,” referring to his inheritance (p. 9). Fred immediately replies, “ Oh, your father? Was he the one who was sleeping with your mother?” Fred responds to Jake’s formality with a mocking statement, which reveals a bitterness toward Andy. They characterize him as a sperm donor, devoid in any emotional connection to them or even their mother. “ Gratitude came not his way. No did he seek it. Masturbation came not his way. ... I’m sorry — I meant approbation came not his way -” Jake says (p. 10). “ Oh, didn’t it really?” Fred says, adding later, “ The answer is that your father was just a little bit short of a few Krugerrands” (p. 10, 14). The sons ridicule Andy in their first appearance on stage and then drop him from their conversation, even as they are approached by Maria and Ralph. Andy is both hurt and infuriated with his sons. “ Two sons. Absent. Indifferent. Their father dying,” he says. “ They were bastards. Both of them” (p. 35). Yet Andy cannot undo the past; it is too late to repair his relationship with his sons. Fred and Jake philosophize on their father’s life and imminent death and they also recognize that Andy will die before they can reconcile the past. Jake eventually tells his brother that

<https://assignbuster.com/discordance-in-the-scenes-of-moonlight/>

what Fred has been saying about Andy is “ atrociously biased and illegitimate onslaught on the weak and vertiginous. ... All his life my father has been subjected to hatred and vituperation. ... He love me. And one day I shall love him” (p. 56-7). Jake explodes under the emotional pressure of losing a father he does not love, but a father nonetheless. He and Fred then determine that “ the full price of that love” is death (p. 57). Death is the price of love; the biggest obstacle to love is the possibility of losing that person. Yet when the sons have the opportunity to confront their father’s death, they turn it into a farce. They can understand the past — their broken relationship with Andy — but they cannot overcome it. In Moonlight, Pinter characterizes death as having a great deal of power. It allows Andy, for instance, to connect to his old love and her husband, a football referee. Yet Andy is restricted in what he can remember about past events, even though Maria, Ralph and Bel insist that they share common memories. He can sense Bridget but he cannot recall that she has already died. Death therefore has a sense of finality in Moonlight; in his journey into the new horizon, Andy can reach back into the past but cannot change what happened. The ultimate loss in this play is for Jake and Fred, however. The sons cannot scale the divide between themselves and Andy; when the father most needs to conquer the past, he is unable to do so.