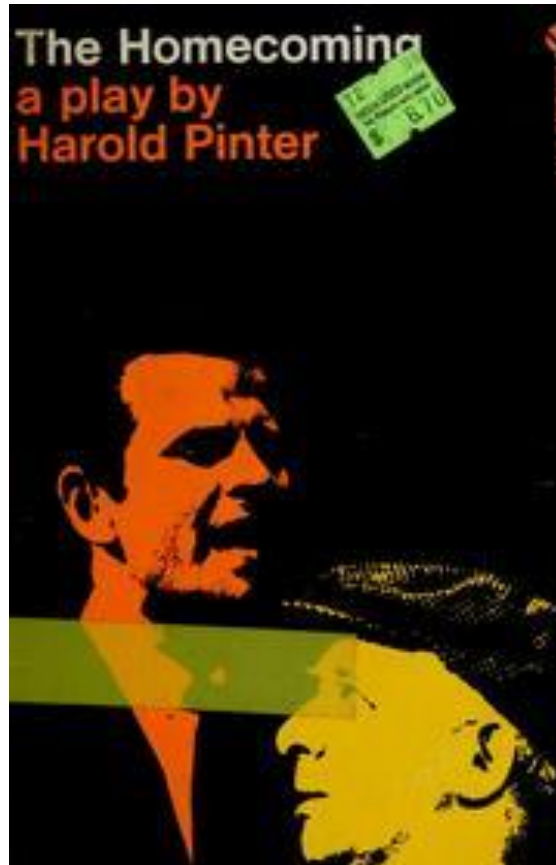


The Depiction of Women in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*

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Abstract

This paper analysis Pinter's play, *The Homecoming*, which is regarded as one of the most important plays written by him. The paper hypothesizes that Pinter presents women character as a strong personality throughout his plays. The study is limited to *The Homecoming* to be treated as a representative of Pinter's plays. Using the characters analyses, the paper tries to prove or disapprove the being put hypothesis. In fact, *The Homecoming* deals with many themes, such as personal loneliness and isolation, appearance and reality, and familial power struggles. Ruth is an important character of the play *The Homecoming*. This play ends with Ruth's personification of strength as an attitude, a fortitude that radiates out and suggests a kind of self-contained happiness. Although Ruth does not declare her happiness, it finds appearance in attitude and

action. She achieves power in the end and is surrounded by others who seek their strength as if hoping to acquire it from her. *The Homecoming* deals about a victory of a woman who keeps doing what she wants to do that she in spite of the horrible unfairness her husband, Teddy brings about by taking a lead in the family's plan against her, and she keeps open the door of the relation and even the possibility of love. She is the strong character that can come over what she faces throughout her life and loves others without any conditions.

Key words: Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming*, Female Character, Feminism, Gender, Familial Power Struggle, Reality.

The Homecoming was written in 1964 and is still regarded as one of Pinter's finest plays. In one of the interviews with Bensky, Pinter claimed that "of all his plays up to that time, *The Homecoming* satisfied him most in terms of structural entity" (57). The play marks the peak of the dual character portrayal of women in Pinter's plays as Ruth is rendered with confidence and accuracy in a shocking narration that never loses its focus. The whore and the multifaceted woman would still occur in Pinter's later plays but never again with such accentuate on character and her social surroundings. Ruth is very different in her strength, attitude and independence towards the male characters and their surroundings.

The homecoming of the play belongs to Teddy, who returns home from America for a visit to his all male family with his wife Ruth. The men's relationship with one another is established through their interaction at the beginning of the play and new characters are introduced steadily with the dialogue giving to audience the information of their relation to one another and the nature of their usual communication with each other. The lack of the mother is declared through comments on her passing away and a split history of the family's story is told through the character's conversations. Something seems wrong from the very start and their use of words and tone suggest a menacing dialogue with exaggerated messages of ill content. In an interview with Miriam Gross in 1980, Pinter claimed that despite evidence to the contrary, love could be found in his plays and taking *The Homecoming* as an example stated "I think there's a great deal of love in that play but they simply don't know what to do with it, referring to the violence exerted by the all-male family" (74).

Once Teddy and Ruth arrive in the house, it is clear that she will become the main focus of the male characters, and their pursuit of power, which was already in play, becomes superior to a much greater degree. Now the power-play is focused on the sole female as the men try to declare their authority over her in various ways. Astonishingly, Ruth enters this pursuit with her own character and personal values at stake. Individual confrontations with each of the male characters follow and the battle for power is fought through action and dialogue. The scene introducing Teddy and Ruth into the story conveys a married couple's ordinary power struggle as they order each other around, each claiming they know what is best for the other. Ruth wins the battle as she leaves the house for a "breath of air" (31) leaving the more insecure Teddy behind. Symbolically, she takes the key to the house with her.

Teddy at first acts as the typical domesticated male character of the 50s, expressing concern for his wife's happiness, and showing planned moves in his attempts to control her. At

the end of the play he represents a husband more in line with what men of the 60s could identify with when he is forced to grant her complete independence in her affairs. One of the most unforgettable lines in the play belong to Teddy, when talking about the living room and how they had knocked down a wall between the room and the hallway, he says “The structure wasn’t effected, you see. My mother was dead.” (29) Implying that his mother’s death had left a comparable hole in the family’s structure. This job thus needs to be filled and Ruth is tried and tested by the family members in an effort to fill the empty role of the mother figure. But Max and Sam’s dialogue suggests that the deceased mother was not only a mother figure but also a working prostitute.

Ruth’s father-in-law Max shows the widest range of emotion in his reaction towards her. Upon first meeting Ruth, he shows extreme violence, using derogative words that compose one of the most shocking dialogues of this particularly shocking play. In the 1966 interview with Bensky, “Pinter mentions the importance of using obscene words sparingly and to avoid putting them on for show as to not diminish their power and wonder just to demonstrate freedom of speech” (63-4). This statement adds weight to the importance of Max’s seemingly unnecessary hostility as he proceeds to call Ruth a “stinking pox-ridden slut” and “filthy scrubber” and claims he has “never had a whore under this roof before” (49-50). In the next act, Max hails Ruth as “a charming woman” (57), and “intelligent and sympathetic” (59), his attitude toward her completely improved in a matter of minutes. These extremes in expression and quick turns in attitude are very in tune with Max’s character. He repeatedly blurts out unsuitable statements towards the rest of the family, including his deceased wife whom he both hails as a wonderful mother and describes as having had a “rotten stinking face” (17). Max represents the lost man, whose stature and role within the home have been upset. He struggles to retain his authority as head of the household yet at the same time reminds the audience of a time of different values.

His youngest son Joey is just the opposite. He is easily dealt with by his sister-in-law who engages in sexual activity with him which results in his disgrace, stripping him of his manliness and asserting his role as the child of the family. He expresses longing for her in the most innocent manner, ending with him kneeling at her feet in the final scene, completely succumbed to her sexuality and power.

Ruth’s scenes with her brother-in-law Lenny are the ones most descriptive of her character and the contrast of the sexes. Where she is playful, peaceful and powerful, Lenny is fumbling, struggling and at times silly. Ruth engages in Lenny’s attacks and returns his verbal assaults and successfully throws him off with a memorable line; “If you take the glass . . . I’ll take you” (42). She seems to methodically enjoy herself whilst engaging in this battle and despite Lenny’s menacing approach, Ruth shows no signs of being threatened or weakened by his attacks. She goes on to call him Leonard, infuriating him to adhere to her motherly status, which he inadvertently asserts by becoming irritated and young. Lenny is composed of conventional male characteristics. He is a powerful, logical, street-wise pimp, an alpha male who holds his ground against all the other male characters. He poses as the antagonist of the narration, in fact the real threat to Ruth the protagonist stems from him, and he appropriately masterminds the plot to profit from prostituting her. Ruth’s victory over Lenny is complete when she negotiates her

own terms into their contract but postpones confirming it until a more suitable time. A time more suitable to herself, asserting that the choice is hers, very in tune with demands from the 60s feminist movement.

If Ruth exemplifies the final whore or goddess, the male characters in *The Homecoming* take on the ultimate fight of the men to overpower the woman. The interesting fact is that they lose despite the actual storyline suggesting otherwise. Ruth, although being left behind with her in-laws for what appears to be sexual slavery, is anything but a victim. After four pages of discussions and completely unemotional talks, she finally accepts the role they offer her and becomes their live-in whore/goddess. The final words of the play belong to Max who in his upset monologue conveys a foreshadowing of a future more favourable to Ruth.

MAX. I don't think she's got it clear.

Pause.

MAX. You understand what I mean? Listen, I've got a funny idea she'll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She'll use us, make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it! You want to bet?

Pause

MAX. She won't . . . be adaptable! (89)

Ruth is a complete and whole character and with her, Pinter's dual female character had peaked. It is in Ruth that Pinter succeeds to perfect his vision of the whore/goddess and the final scene of *The Homecoming* underlines her stature; Ruth sitting kind and calm in an armchair with Joey kneeling at her feet, Lenny standing next to her and the two older male characters kneeling or lying on the floor. The image recalls that of an altarpiece, with Ruth representing Mary, the Holy Mother and the female goddess. The characters physical appearance at the end of the play should leave no doubt as to Ruth yielding power over all the men present. The only ambivalent attitude is that of Lenny who "stands watching" (90) which could be interpreted as his present hold on the situation. In his reaction to a 1994 Paris production where Lenny was seen placing his hand on Ruth's shoulder in the final scene, Pinter claimed that this was an incorrect interpretation, saying "[...] Lenny does not have any power over her" (175).

Harold Pinter's own personal issues of the 60s, the pursuit of the new woman image and the conflicts of gender within the home and family shines through the play. The resulting statement is that women possess individual strength and the ability to achieve balance in her diversity, whilst facing adversity. Above and beyond social or sexual politics, Harold Pinter was an artist and his plays are works of art, brought on by a need to create, not mediate meaning. That part is left to the reader. At the same time we can safely assume that as an artist he was influenced by his contemporary discourse on issues that ended up in his plays and during the 60s, Pinter contemplated the power struggle of gender in domesticity through his benevolent approach to the whore.

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