

Harold Pinter's Portrayal of Woman in "THE HOMECOMING"

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Harold Pinter, the 2005 Nobel Laureate for Literature, was born October 10, 1930, in London's working-class Hackney district to Hyman and Frances Pinter, Eastern European Jews who had immigrated to the United Kingdom from Portugal. Hyman, known as "Jack", was a tailor specializing in women's clothing and Frances was a homemaker. The Pinters, whose families hailed from Odessa and Poland in the Russian Empire, were part of a wave of Jewish emigration to the UK at the turn of the last century. It was a community that valued learning and culture. The Pinter family was close, and young Harold was shocked when, at the occurrence of World War II, he was evacuated from London to Cornwall with other London children for a year to avoid becoming victims of German aerial bombing. (Hopwood, 2011).

This paper handles 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 emotional impotence, Oedipal desires, personal loneliness and isolation, appearance and reality, and familial power struggles, to mention a few; and with its first performance, audiences and critics alike sensed that there is a great deal more going on in the play than can be easily articulated. As John Russell Taylor put it in *Plays and Players* magazine, "The secret of the play does not lie in our providing a neat crossword-puzzle solution" (Cengage, 2009) Despite—and perhaps because of—the play's ambiguity, *The Homecoming* has remained a centerpiece in Pinter's canon.

In this respect Elizabeth Sakellaridou in her book, *"Pinter's Female Portraits: a Study of the Female Characters in the plays of Harold Pinter"* (1988) states that Pinter is preoccupied in *The Homecoming* as well as in his other works with many thoughts such as:

Fascination with the unknown and love of philosophical contemplation, presentation of strong male friendship, prevalence of male thoughts, isolation of the woman and ambiguity of feeling towards her. (Sakellaridou, 1988, 17)

In fact, Harold Pinter presents extraordinary challenges to literary history that make him a considerable figure for the historiography of modern drama, political art, and modernism in general. What this project tries to present is to place Pinter's vision of woman in its correct context and before anything else the concern with human relationships, status and future with regard to female character as being portrayed in *The Homecoming*. In tracing the development of Pinter's woman's character, the paper treats the characters speeches as well as their situations to show Pinter's vision of woman as being suggested by the hypothesis limited to *The Homecoming* because woman's character in this play is "the most misunderstood of all Harold Pinter's characters" (Prentice, 2000,127). For the most part, Pinter's dramatic techniques are very simple, and much of his success as a dramatist is based on this simplicity. In the early plays he used blackouts to mystify his audience and to highlight his main points. However, he allows his main points to determine his mode of expression, especially in *The Homecoming*. The structure, the dramatic expression of the concept of verification, the use of humor, and the "Pinteresque" employment of language are some of the techniques used by Pinter.

In this sense, *The Homecoming* is Pinter's distinctive play in that it does not only create a distinctive style, but also has the essential elements, which convey and carry the meaning of the Pinterisque drama. Quite often several of these elements are used in combination with one another, either as the resources of carrying the meaning or as the actual statement of meaning. Humor, for example, is used for particular reasons, just as language is, but the special use of language is also a source of humor, so that both elements accomplish Pinter's purpose of revealing problems in communication and the consequential situation. They function at the same time as the statement and the means of expressing the statement. The tightness and economy of the resulting play, together with an understanding and balancing of diverse elements create a choral effect, a sense of orchestration so corporeal that critics recognize the poetic, musical nature not only of the dialogue, but also of the piece in its entirety with its thematic overtone, implication, and rich elements. All these elements work along the line for stating Pinter's Philosophy concerning life and people by clarifying and amplifying his vision regarding woman's status and portrayal. The critics agreed that Pinter always uses life situations and simple language to give his character life.

Pinter's desire to present life-like characters does not give an impression of realism rather than giving a real impression about the impotence of life (Bernhard, 1964, 185-191). In this sense Martin Esslin states that the key to understand the play is to grasp its poetic force which lies in the ambivalence between a sequence of realistic events and a wish-fulfillment dream (Esslin, 2001, 255).

In their article entitled, "*Harold Pinter, The Playwright of the Pause, Dies at 78*" Mel Gassow and Ben Brantley state that:

In more than 30 plays written between 1957 and 2000 and including masterworks like "The Birthday Party," "The Caretaker," "The Homecoming" and "Betrayal" Mr. Pinter captured the anxiety and ambiguity of life in the second half of the 20th century with terse, hypnotic dialogue filled with gaping pauses and the prospect of imminent violence. (Gassow, 2008).

They clarify in their statement that Pinter's plays are but captures of things happen in life such as anxiety and ambiguity. Pinter's technique for dramatically expressing his premise of anxiety and ambiguity as well as lacking verification is extremely simple and obvious in *The Homecoming* that he merely puts side-by-side similarly opposing statements of fact. Max's contrasting images of his dead wife, Jessie; Lenny's decision about the girl falling apart with the pox; Joey's story about the birds in the Scrubs; Sam's approval of Jessie as a woman without peer and his incident of her infidelity; and the disagreement in the descriptions of America offered by Teddy and Ruth are all examples of this technique.

In 1965 *The Homecoming* becomes one of the most popular plays by Pinter, and it has proved to be among the most controversial plays, at least as far as newspaper critics and academic commentators are concerned. *The Homecoming* is set in a dingy interior; there is throughout the play a sense of largely suppressed violence; the exchanges between the characters seem to be composed substantially of non sequiturs; the words that the characters actually say are divorced from what they mean (Wyllie, 2003). These conversations show clearly that there is struggle undersides the relation of the characters.

The struggle is evident in this play that everyone in *The Homecoming* thinks to have 'the Power' over others. But who does have it? This is a question that this project tries to find out. The struggle presented in the play is the mean

by which Pinter discloses his vision of woman, because it is throughout the struggle that the characters show their inclination towards dominance and supremacy. From the very beginning in the play, from the page of the characterization, Pinter gives men apparent dominance over woman in that it is a play of only one woman character and five men:

MAX, *a man of seventy*

LENNY, *a man in his early thirties* SAM, *a man of sixty-three*

JOEY, *a man in his middle twenties*

TEDDY, *a man in his middle thirties* RUTH, *a woman in her early thirties* (Pinter, 1965, x)

Mentioning the characterization this way can be seen in two ways: first, Pinter highly underestimates woman and present one woman to decrease her role in life as a reflection of her unessential role in life. Second, Pinter highly appreciates woman in that he find that only woman is fair enough to confront five men and that reflects her undeniable ability to achieve dominance. The play starts with a beautiful, elegant woman, Ruth, sprawls on a sofa in a drab working-class front room which contains five men: her husband, Teddy, her husband's two brothers, her elderly father-in-law and his brother. Her husband's youngest brother, Joey, lies heavily on top of her, grinding his pelvis into her in a simulation of intercourse, while the other brother caresses her hair and the two older men watch, transfixed. Soon her husband, who loves her, will stand by passively, as his family (whom she has only just met) concocts a scheme to set her up as a prostitute in the West End, to serve them. The beginning of the play discloses that there is intent to treat Ruth as a whore by all the male characters in the play among them her husband, Teddy. This intent is obvious and it is this intent that creates the two-sided struggle, in one side there are the five male characters, and in the other side there is Ruth.

Some critics believe that *The Homecoming* is a unique Pinter Play for it is the play in which the idea of attack and defense is discussed inside the text. The old patriarch Max giving his son, Joey, the boxer, an advice saying:

MAX: What you've got to do is you've got to learn how to defend yourself, and you've to learn how to attack. That's your only trouble as a boxer. You don't know how to defend yourself, and you don't know how to attack. (Pinter, 1965, p.33)

This advice is applicable to other characters in the play as well as other plays. Max considers himself the dominant member of the family at the beginning of the play. At the opening of Act one he accuses Lenny of having the scissors, in a very predatory, offensive way. He is wearing a cap and carrying a stick as a sign to others in the house of his claim in the family as the physically powerful male. However Max is clearly unsure about this power as he talks at Lenny, rather than with him, continuing his next sentence before Lenny decides to reply. He also later has to remind Lenny, and himself that "*I could have taken care of you, twice over. I'm still strong,*" attempting to persuade Lenny as well as himself that he is the most powerful physical force in the house. On the other hand, in this confrontation Lenny thinks he is the dominant force, because he considers that he is powerful because his pimping business means he is the principal breadwinner in the house. This is backed up by his claim on wearing a suit in his own lounge and his stories later to Ruth, where he is keen to mention that he was not "*financially embarrassed*". Both Max's and Lenny's insistence on proving how powerful they are, undermines their trustworthiness.

Max in the opening minutes almost makes the audience cringe with his exaggerated tales of "*a man called McGregor*" whom he used to "*knock about with*" where McGregor is clearly the one who caused the "*silence*" in the rooms they went into and his insistence that he still has "*the scars*" although he does not show them, adds to the lack of trustworthiness in Max's stories. Lenny, later, when threatened by Ruth's assertiveness feels the need to reel off stories of his past about old women he punched and prostitutes he considered killing which threatens his trustworthiness and directly make the audience see that neither Max nor Lenny has the dominance, however both Max and Lenny give the notion they are dominant in the house and until the threat of Teddy and Ruth turns up Lenny and Max appear to the audience as the two who have the power in the household.

In contrast to Max's attempts at physical power to gain overall dominance and Lenny's power gained through his business, Sam has a much more subtle, yet ineffective, type of power to gain control of the household. His secret that "*McGregor had Jessie in the back of my cab as I drove them along*", gives him a power over Teddy, Lenny, Joey and particularly Max. Max does not want the secret exposed in the open. Hence he refuses to talk

with Sam when Sam repeatedly pauses during his monologue about his chauffeuring of Jessie in the West End. Even when Sam mentions that Max wouldn't have trusted Mac, Max remains subservient because he does not want Sam to be involved in the subject. Max straight away bites back calling Sam "*an old grub*" showing that Sam's power over Max lies only in his knowledge of Mac and Jessie's affair. Although it appears to the audience that Sam has some amount of power through his unfriendly nature and his secret, throughout the play we clearly realize he has little power over the household once his secret is let out. They leave Sam lying on the floor and pay little attention to him, Teddy even complains that he was going to ask Sam for a lift to the airport and Max's indifference to whether Sam is dead, shown by his relaxed handling of whether Sam *had* or *has* a *diseased imagination* prove how little power Sam has over the family unit.

Max is keen to assert his physical supremacy over Sam. He makes Sam acknowledge that "*I'm here, too you know*" and the protective nature of Max's endeavor at gaining dominance is shown through Max's annoyance of Sam doing the washing up. Max, even after Sam offers to let Max finish the washing up, calls him a *tit*, which is an attempt to feminize Sam in his mind and he calls Sam a *maggot* and a *grub*, since both have little physical power Max is undoubtedly trying to emphasize Sam's physical weakness and therefore dominates him physically. The struggle among the male characters shows that they are weak persons and they cannot be one unit to defeat the other side, Ruth. On the other hand, Lenny clearly feels threatened by Sam's title of *the best driver*. When Sam is showing off his cigars to Max, Lenny clearly feels threatened and although on the surface appears to be making general conversation about the *colonel, or something in the American Air Force* he is actually trying to belittle Sam's success by showing him that *he knows the kind of man you're talking about*, implying he is one of them, not a servant for them like Sam. Once again Lenny is projecting the image that he is successful and therefore powerful in the house. Because no one severely threatens him in his position, the falseness of his stories does not appear.

The Homecoming is the first play by Pinter to present a woman; an initially subservient character attacked on all sides to be dominant and succeeds in gaining something positive, her freedom. Ruth whom encouraged by all the family members, except Teddy's Uncle, Sam, to stay in England and earn

her living by being, they suggest, a prostitute, decides avoiding any commitment by conducting negotiations in the strictly conditional or contra-factual tense throughout:

Ruth: I would want at least three rooms and a bathroom. (Pinter, 1965, 77)

Ruth: You would have to regard your original outlay simply as capital investment. (Ibid. 78)

Ruth: All aspects of agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified to our mutual satisfaction before we finalized the contract. (Ibid.)

Ruth only conditionally concludes, " *Well it might prove a workable arrangement*"(Ibid.) and when Lenny asks her if she wants "to *shake on it now or later.*" She refuses to finalize the agreement: "*Oh, we'll leave it till later.*"(Ibid. 79) Although Ruth's erotic engagement with Joey on the sofa and her expressed approval of their plan "*Yes, It sounds a very attractive idea*" (Ibid. 77) suggest she might consent to their proposal, nothing she says or does commits her to agreement. Sufficiently convincing evidence also raises doubt that she will remain with the family. Max, who at the beginning claims that he could smell whether a horse race was a stayer or not, in the end smells that Ruth will not stay:

Listen, I've got a funny idea she'll do the dirty on us, you want to bet?

She'll make use of us, I can tell! I can smell it. (Ibid. 81)

Max's suspicion that she will leave, coupled with Ruth's command of herself and the family at the end (she makes Lenny bring her a proper glass of water and demand food from Joey), confirms that Ruth is in charge of her life and may exercise the option to leave. Ruth proves to be the commander and the five male are but to obey her orders. Rather than commenting on anything, Ruth waits silently for the best moment to defend herself, and then takes over. It is quite clear that no man in the family has ever understood neither Ruth nor any other women even the dead Jessie. Whereas Ruth understands them all, she arranges to assert her superiority, which leaves them, unfulfilled, defeated, and baffled. Her command, as Pinter notes is merely a defense against their attack:

She misinterpreted deliberately and used by this family. But eventually she comes back at them with a whip: she says" if you

want to play this game I can play it as well as you" (Hewes, 1967, 143).

In the first three scenes Ruth is misinterpreted unconsciously by her husband then deliberately by Lenny and brutally by Teddy's father, Max when Teddy and Ruth first enter in the middle of the night Ruth announced that she is tired, yet twice after that Teddy asks, "*Tired?*" showing how out of touch and indifference to his wife he is. (Pinter, 21-22) When Ruth answers "*No*" Teddy replies, "*Go to bed, I'll show you to your room*" (Ibid.) He may seem concerned when he asks "*Are you cold?*" but when she answers she is not, he offers her "*something hot to drink.*" (Pinter, 21) Regarding Ruth, His brother's woman Lenny deliberately misinterprets her position especially when he changes the direction of the speech as she tries to correct, "I'm his wife" and "We are married". He ignores her saying:

"Eh, listen I wonder if you can advise me, I've been a bit of a tough time with this clock" (Ibid. 29)

After that, in a verbal battle Lenny becomes openly aggressive asking her "*Do you mind if I hold your hand?*" his aggression is to hide his desire to hold her hand and to protect himself in case that she refused to let him hold her hand. And to achieve this he tries to attack her when she asks him "*why?*" By mentioning a past event with another woman, "*So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that.*" (Ibid, 31). These mixed signals, the disguised threats which at the same time communicate attraction, repulsion and fear take the form of a bullying that masks Lenny's cowardice, which Ruth uncovers when she turns to defend herself. Pinter's word "*whip*", which might refer to Ruth's wit, is a way to defend herself. Each of her deeds is intentionally done. She is the only clever character in the play that at the end of the play has the dominance over others. Whereas other characters behave just unintentionally, e.g. foolishly Lenny proposes, "*And now perhaps I'll relieve you of your glass,*" but Ruth who understands him well defends herself by attacking him because she knows the rules of the game well. She decides not to be the subservient of this game, and thus, she answers, "*If you take the glass...I'll take you*" (Ibid. 35) an answer that makes Lenny astonished to shout at her as she gets upstairs, "*What's that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal?*" (Ibid.)

Intentionally, the third misinterpretation comes in the next morning by Teddy's father, Max, who tries to maintain his patriarchal position. When

Teddy assures, "She's *my wife! We are married!*" his father says with a double-edged cut: "I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since, your mother died." Teddy's answer is: "She is my wife" but Max insists, "chuck them out." (Ibid. 42) That is Ruth's introduction to Teddy's family. Thus, Ruth has to have certain mechanism to protect herself as she lives with such a family. This statement can be read in two levels. The first level is that Teddy's dead mother was a whore and that an image which her husband and sons accepted, the second level is that Ruth is regarded as a whore at least by her husband's family.

This family ironically condemns Ruth without evidence for her guilt as a whore or a slut, whereas accepts Lenny as a pimp. Thereby, this family converts a wife to a mere prostitute, by regarding the word, wife a mere label and to make marriage be off of any bounds. This is clear as Sam exclaims against the family's proposal to keep Ruth, "but she's his wife" (Ibid. 68). It is a meaningless statement as the family devalued marriage by attacking it. Ruth's behaviour is just an attempt to protect herself because of her husband's inability and indifference to defend their marriage. It is not because of her immorality but because of her hopelessness. Ruth thinks that if she has to be a whore, she will be a whore in her way and style and not theirs.

She is not a "nymphomaniac" (Penelope. 127), as some critics claimed or as Austin Quigley suggests that when she comes with Teddy "Ruth is indeed coming to her home to her former self..." (Quigley, 1975, 205) In fact she's not very sexy. She's in a kind of despair and hopelessness that gives her a kind of freedom. Certain facts, like marriage and family, for this woman has clearly ceased to have meaning. In this point in the play Teddy, her husband stops to protect her or even shows her his respect. To use Max's statement "What do you know about what she wants, eh Ted?" (Pinter, 69) is the core of her despair for she proposes to Teddy to go back to their children but he does not pay any attention to her while he tells his family "...we've got back to the children." (Ibid.) Another point which shows that Teddy neither concerns nor pays attention to Ruth's interests when Sam says loudly, "She's a mother. She's got three children" Max's response is: "She can have more. Here. If she's so keen". While Teddy answers, "She doesn't want any more children." (Ibid.) His response misses the point of both Sam's objection and Max's angry reply.

All that Teddy concerns with is his desires for he comes back to get his father's blessings and his family's approval and praise without giving them anything but offense. He tries to show his supremacy over other persons in the family when he describes them as just objects. But as he fails to defend himself against his family he becomes a Ruth's subservient. Teddy and not Ruth, is the one who shows little concerns about the children. Thereby assuming her a bad mother for leaving her children easily is a mistake. The only reason she gives to leave England and go back to America at the beginning of the play is "*I think...the children...might be missing us.*"(Ibid. 22) Thus, she thinks and behaves as a good mother and not as a whore.

Again Teddy is the person who delivers Ruth the family's proposal, "*Ruth... the family has invited you to stay, for a little while longer. As a ...as a kind of guest*" (Ibid.75). If he doesn't accept their offer, he wouldn't deliver it to Ruth. But by delivering the proposal he acknowledges his cowardice, and he encourages her to accept: "*If you like the idea I don't mind. We can manage very easily at home...until you get back.*"(Ibid.) his behaviour can be considering a declaration for his destruction as a husband and a shifting point in Ruth- Teddy relation. It is with this behaviour that Ruth decides to go on her struggle to gain freedom. From that point on, Ruth turns against Teddy to gain power over the whole family by attaching to their proposal a series of conditional demands for clothing, rooms, and a personal maid, which are very likely not to be achieved. Yet unless they meet her demands, she says that she will not agree. This situation shows Ruth's ability to govern the whole male characters in the family. Needless to say that the probability of Ruth's leaving is equivalent to the probability of her staying, because the final point, Ruth's dominance, is uncertain. This uncertainty serves to give all characters the same chance of the audience's empathy. Moreover, it deepens the character and breaks up the differences between the characters. Hence, the end of the play serves Ruth in that it presents her as equal to other characters.

The Homecoming presents a shift from a mere continuity to live to the condition of survival with hope. Ruth does not just live but she has the power over other characters and she guides them not to use her their way. Because she either stays under her conditions or leaves them. Thus she gains her freedom. Obviously, the basic structural device in *The Homecoming* is the framework of a power struggle in which sex turns out to be the deciding

negotiator. In a series of skirmishes throughout the drama, the characters meet, compete, and attempt to gain supremacy over one another, with Ruth using sex to appear triumphant. There is a tension set up by the alternating tonalities (humor versus horror, for example) of the continuing confrontations.

Through the form of verbal fence, the weaponry of the power struggle, Pinter exposes the characters and their beliefs, thus providing the meaning of the play, his vision. For instance, Teddy and Lenny's discussion of the dual nature of reality can in part be considered a battle for position, and power, but it is also important as a means for discovering some of the characters' private problems. Teddy, the professional philosopher, fails to unravel problems in his own field. Lenny practices logical thinking on his own to create theoretical answers, establishing his dominance over his older brother, in that way making more solid their personal identities. Ruth begins with Lenny's statements, but rejects them by applying the attitude of practicality, reducing them to an emotional level - the level on which they in reality function anyway. Thereby, the struggle for dominance is going on throughout the play among all the characters. But when the clashes are going on between male characters, they continued all in vain. While the struggle between any male character and Ruth always results in a triumph for Ruth. She always proves that she is the only character in the play who knows the rules of the game.

Often in *The Homecoming*, the struggles for domination take the form of verbal battles, and Lenny is trying to beat his brother in his brother's own particular field. Ruth takes off from this point, though, to suggest that the words themselves are not important, that there is something which lies below them, just as there is a leg under her underwear. Perhaps the fact that lips move is more significant than the sounds, which come through them. In this respect, jargon has led to this point and surely the reality that lies under the technical language is more important than the words trying to describe that reality.

For Ruth, the truth is essential. It is obvious that she quits any restrictions and be free. But Teddy, the philosopher, (Ironically) the lover of the truth, lies throughout. With no evidence, he claims that Ruth is unwell, and that he offers the family a model of virtue, and by claiming that the superiority is to the intellect and not to the emotion. His inability to face himself of his own

faults and desires makes him lose his wife. In his attempt to prove that he is better than the others, Teddy loses the battle for he tries to get respect by taking it from others. His behaviour reflects the subversive vision Pinter tries to illustrate in his work. Pinter dramatizes that the very quest for respect, and survival, when driven by the desire to dominate another, inevitably leads to destruction of human relationship by destroying both the other and in many senses the self. In this respect, of course, *The Homecoming* passes the line of private to communal level in that the subversive vision is not directed to the self but to the community around the destructive character. Austin Quigley on the subject of the characters suggests that:

“Their linguistic battles are not the product of an arbitrary desire for dominance but crucial battles for control of the means by which personality is created in the social system to which they belong. As they struggle to cope, their misunderstandings and miscalculations provide a great deal of amusement for any audience, but invariably desperation and terror are eventually revealed as the linguistic warfare becomes increasingly crucial.” (Quigley, 276-7)

Thereby, the communal level reflects the realistic aspect in Pinter's work. Moreover, the importance of the language in a Pinter play represents the weapon, which is used by the characters to attack or to defend themselves. *The Homecoming* ends with Ruth's embodiment of strength as an attitude, a fortitude that radiates out and suggests a kind of self-contained happiness. Although Ruth does not proclaim her happiness, it finds expression 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 end is open to confirm Pinter's opinion that “she does not become a harlot” (Hewes, 58) and he concludes that:

“At the end of the play she is in possession of a certain kind of freedom. She can do what she wants, and it is not at all certain she will go off to Greek Street.” (Ibid., 57 and Naismith, 2000, 185) It is a play about a triumph of a woman who keeps doing what she wants to do that she in spite of the terrible injustice 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 who can come over what she faces throughout her life and keeps loving others without any conditions.

The study concludes that Pinter has presented Ruth as a good portrait of a strong woman who can determine her way of living with her own conditions and who can impose her opinion to others, male characters with enough confrontation and that comes as an emphasis to the hypothesis being put at the primer of this paper.

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