



Major Themes In Harold Pinter's Play, The Home Coming

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Abstract:

The Homecoming is a two-act play written in 1964 by Harold Pinter and first published in 1965. After having lived in the United States for several years, Teddy brings his wife, Ruth, home for the first time to meet his working-class family in North London, where he grew up, and which she finds more familiar than their arid academic life in America. The two married in London before moving to the United States. Much sexual tension occurs as Ruth teases Teddy's brothers and father and the men taunt one another in a game of one-upmanship, resulting in Ruth's staying behind with Teddy's relatives as "one of the family" and Teddy returning home to their three sons in America without her.

Pinter's plays are ambivalent in their plots, presentation of characters, and endings, but they are works of undeniable power and originality. The Homecoming focuses on the return to his London home of a university professor who brings his wife to meet his brothers and father. The woman's presence exposes a tangle of rage and confused sexuality in this all-male household, but in the end she decides to stay with the father and his two sons after having accepted their sexual overtures without protest from her overly detached husband. In this paper we propose to trace the various major themes of the play, The Home Coming.

Keywords: Male household, Sexuality, Sexual Tension, Themes, Working class.

Introduction:

After having lived in the United States for several years, Teddy brings his wife, Ruth, home for the first time to meet his working-class family in North London, where he grew up, and which she finds more familiar than their arid academic life in America. The two married in London before moving to the United States.

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relatives as “one of the family” and Teddy returning home to their three sons in America without her.

In addition to the play being about Teddy’s homecoming on a literal level, critics have suggested that, on a metaphoric level, the homecoming is Ruth’s. That, symbolically, Ruth comes “home” to “herself”: she rediscovers her previous identity prior to her marriage to Teddy. Ironically, as she “comes home” to this family which has been for so long womanless (motherless, wifeless, etc), she thus abandons her own biological family with Teddy, leaving them now similarly bereft.

By the end of the play, Ruth appears to have assumed the multiple roles of Jessie, the family’s absent wife and mother, the missing woman in their household (“mother/wife/whore” in terms used by critics), while putting the American family of Ruth and Teddy in a parallel position, thus ironically reversing the situation at the beginning of the play.[6] In that sense, the play recalls Edward’s reversal of roles with the silent Matchseller in Pinter’s 1959 play *A Slight Ache*, initially broadcast on BBC Radio 3, and similarly ironic plot and character role-reversals resulting from power struggles throughout many of Pinter’s other plays.

Dialogue is of central importance in Pinter’s plays and is perhaps the key to his originality. His characters’ colloquial (“Pinteresque”) speech consists of disjointed and oddly ambivalent conversation that is punctuated by resonant silences. The characters’ speech, hesitations, and pauses reveal not only their own alienation and the difficulties they have in communicating but also the many layers of meaning that can be contained in even the most innocuous statements.

Various Themes:

The Dueling Roles of Women

In *The Homecoming*, there is little room for moderation, and this is especially true of the two female characters who are mentioned by name, Jessie and Ruth. In many ways, there are similarities between the two; both of them have three boys, were married, and yet carried on

sexual relations with other men. This illustrates that both of the characters fulfill two roles, that of the mother and that of the prostitute.

The role of the mother manifests most clearly in Jessie, the late, absent matriarch of the play. Several times, Max sings Jessie’s praises during his reminiscing. He claims that Jessie would have loved to have seen the family united together and that she would have made a

perfect grandmother. The children, too, seem to fondly remember Jessie as a mother figure in their lives. In an early scene, even Sam, Max's brother, claims that their relationship must be strong because Max once trusted Sam to drive Jessie around. Sam is insistent that driving her around was all that he did, and that she remained faithful to Max. This illusion, though, is dispelled at the play's end, when it is implied that the car rides were actually so that Jessie could carry on an affair with Max's now-deceased best friend, Mac.

Ruth also embodies both halves of the mother-prostitute dichotomy. In dealing with Lenny and Joey, she is only too happy to make sexual advances and to, as Pinter puts it, give out the gravy. Her negotiations of the terms by which she will become a prostitute also suggest that she has some experience in the business. This side of her character is tied in to her sexuality and her attractiveness as a female; it is while she tells Lenny of her time as a model or when she declares that she is interested in the movement of her legs that her role as a woman is most emphasized. At the play's end, though, it is left unclear whether this is actually a future to which she aspires or whether she simply longs for the beauty of her youth and to be recognized as valuable.

This conception contrasts with her role as a mother, which is reflected in her interactions with Teddy. Teddy tries to remind her of their life in America and their children to convince her to leave the house rather than to engage in business with his brothers. He is practical and cold in his reasoning, claiming that it is cleaner in America than in Britain and that the weather is better. This sort of logic is designed to appeal to the side of her character that values stability, comfort, and motherhood, but it is exactly that rationale that she seems to despise and that draws her instead to Teddy's family. With regards to Max, the patriarch is only able to accept Ruth into the family when he first can visualize her as a mother—like his wife Jessie was—rather than as a

bride or as a sexual being. This identity, too, is left in limbo at the play's end, as Ruth's final fate is never determined.

Masculinity

The Homecoming is one of Pinter's few plays that deals specifically with the theme of masculinity, touching on the idea in a vein similar to Hemingway's machismo. Masculinity is almost like a toxic disease in the household, pervading the actions and thoughts and values of the characters. All the males feel the need to assert dominance over others; they criticize, bully, manipulate, and threaten. They find their identity in their work and in their assumption of power. They view women as objects and as falling into only two categories of mother and whore. They become disconcerted when anything or anyone threatens their masculinity, and work to assert it at all cost. While each of the male characters has a trait or

two that save them from being totally reprehensible, ultimately they are classic mid-20th century males, keen on retaining and enforcing the patriarchal status quo.

The first contrast is between the members of the older generation: Max, Sam, and Mac. Max uses his physical career as a butcher, where he wielded an ax and a cleaver, to contrast with Sam's less demanding job as a chauffeur. With regards to Mac, Max fondly remembers his physicality and his ability to challenge other men in the room. This contrast is seen further in the play's final scene, where the affair between Mac and Jessie is revealed. The side of Jessie that valued motherhood was happy with Max, but the side that valued physicality and masculinity sought out Mac. Sam, meanwhile, is never mentioned as having any contact with women, and Max jokes that Sam would become a prostitute himself if he could.

The second contrast is between the three brothers Lenny, Joey, and Teddy. Teddy is clearly the intellectual, being a professor of philosophy and presenting calculated reasoning for all of his statements throughout the play. This does not bode well for his masculinity; indeed, over the course of Ruth's transformation from a mother to a prostitute, she all but ignores Teddy as she becomes more intertwined with his family. Lenny, as a pimp, represents the pinnacle of masculinity, and is able both to share stories of violence with Ruth and to connect with her past as a model. Joey is the odd one out. Despite being in demolition during the day and trying to

make it as a boxer by night, both of which are physical professions, he is attracted to the motherly side of Ruth more than anything else. This is illustrated by his total lack of consideration towards girls that he picks up while cruising with Lenny, and not going all the way with Ruth.

The Passage of Time

The theme of aging haunts the older characters in *The Homecoming*. Two prominent members of the older generation—Mac and Jessie—are never seen onstage because they are already dead. Max and Sam, while alive, only talk about the past when they are together. They talk about Sam's old job, their dead mother's role in the family, their memories about Mac, and finally Sam reveals that Mac and Jessie would have sex in the backseat of his car. This theme is most prominently displayed in the play's final lines, in which Max insists that he is not an old man and is clearly trying to prove to Ruth that he is still able to perform sexually. An ironic aspect of this theme is the ordering of the children. Teddy, the least masculine son, is the eldest, while Joey, the son with the most humanity and the most concrete ambitions, is the youngest.

The Power of Silences

The “Pinter Pause,” as it has been called, is a characteristic of many of Harold Pinter’s plays. Pinter once asserted that silence can either be the complete absence of conversation or the complete inundation of conversation from all parties. The two characters who use pauses extensively in their conversation in *The Homecoming* are Teddy and Max. For Teddy, his pauses are bouts of hesitancy where he is unsure of what to say. This exemplifies the complete absence of conversation because Teddy is unable to fill in the gaps left by his family and his life. For Max, his pauses are breaks in his reminiscing when he is discussing the past ad nauseam. These broken monologues sometimes take up several minutes’ worth of the play. It is almost as if he has so many memories, so many different things to say, that he cannot make up his mind which stories or details to relate. This explains both the fragmentary picture of the past that Max conveys and how sometimes silence can convey more meaning than speech

Family

This is a twisted family, but it’s a family nonetheless. There is bickering, violence, rivalry, and cruelty, but as Lenny tells Teddy, it is a unit and it must be protected. The working-class London world is clearly difficult in terms of material success and social dynamics but the family is there unconditionally. In a strange way, Ruth is only really accepted when she is deemed part of the family; similarly, Teddy letting her stay is also a bit of “grace” for his family.

Knowledge

Most of the characters in the play desire knowledge because it allows them to control their world. With the exception of Teddy, whose knowledge is academic, and Sam, who actually wishes he had less knowledge in terms of Jessie and MacGregor’s automobile trysts, the others want answers to questions and/or want to fashion those answers as they see fit. They want knowledge in order to attain power and dominance.

Power and Dominance

If there is one theme in *The Homecoming* that permeates almost every scene, every character, every line and penumbra, it is the desire for power and dominance. All of the characters want to assert these things over others, whether it is verbally or physically or sexually. They want to survive and thrive but not in an amicable, communal way; rather, they preen and posture and provoke. Everyone competes with everyone else, and even though they do not all attain power and dominance or retain it, they at least have it in the moment of assertion.

Modern Life

As critic John Warner avers, “The Homecoming is a drama which describes man’s plight in the godless world of science and reason.” Indeed, God is pretty much absent from the text, as are conventional morals or social norms. Teddy, who looks like the most anodyne character at first, comes to reveal the dearth of value and morality. America, which is “clean” and dull and science-oriented, is where Teddy chooses to live and work. Teddy values objectivity and has few emotions; thus, it is not surprising that Ruth finds her life there oppressive in its barrenness.

Materialism, commercialism, and rationality at the expense of emotion and authenticity characterize modern life, and Pinter suggests it has a propensity to be bankrupt.

Sex

Much of the play is about sex—Jessie and MacGregor, Lenny’s job, Ruth with Joey and Lenny, Ruth’s potential role as a prostitute—but it is oddly stripped of heat, of passion. Critic Thomas Postelwait comments, “sex lacks its moral (and immoral) meanings for guiding the attitudes of the characters and the audience,” and Bert States doubts Pinter’s characters are troubled by sexual appetites and “seem far more interested in manipulating the idea of sexuality, for its effect on others, than their own performance.” Sex is detached from its traditional meanings, and mostly factors into the characters’ desire for dominance.

Observation

When Ruth tells the family to observe her leg and to imagine her underwear underneath, suggesting ultimately that they “restrict....[their] observations to that” (53), she gives voice to one of the main themes of the text. Characters like Ruth, Lenny, and Max are masters of observation and use that skill, in most cases, to their advantage. Lenny sits and observes Ruth when she comes into the house on the first night, and Ruth’s keen observation of his plays for power allow her to eventually best him. Max tries hard to be a good observer, but because he is not he misses what happens with Jessie and MacGregor and comes to the realization that Ruth may not be adaptable until it is too late. Astute observation of others allows Pinter’s characters to achieve dominance.

Thus we see that in the play, The Homecoming Harold Pinter has dealt with a lot of themes and all these themes are related with the realities of life. In fact this is a realistic play which is based on the observation of life.

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