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Six characters in search of a mother: Re-reading the homecoming

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Abstract

This essay presents a very brief critical reflection on *The Homecoming*, arguably one of the most provocative and polarizing plays of Harold Pinter. Focusing predominantly on the figure and the function of the “Mother” in the play and, more specifically, how the specter of the “absent mother” holds an uncanny influence over the various characters and the events, this essay attempts to locate how the “Mother” acts as the central unifying axis in the plot. To this end, I examine how the six characters who appear onstage approach, engage and negotiate with the figure of the “Mother” at different points in the play. I also foreground how the play challenges fixed categories being imposed on its female characters and simultaneously disrupts the normative sexual roles assigned to them within a patriarchal family.

Keywords: Family, motherhood, womanhood, patriarchy, theatre

Introduction

Since its first publication in 1965 and the premiere at the Aldwych Theatre, London, in 1966, Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming* has emerged as one of the most controversial yet intensely entertaining twentieth-century English plays on both shores of the Atlantic. Commercially successful and critically acclaimed worldwide, the play continues to delight, perplex, and astonish its spectators and readers alike even after more than half a century of its existence. It is also a play that has simultaneously intrigued and baffled readers, critics, and reviewers with its portrayal of internal conflicts and psychological nuances in the characters. Many critics and reviewers who had initially approached the play simply as a piece of realistic family drama have ended up providing extra-textual speculations and supplementary moralising that the playwright himself has masterfully avoided, primarily centred upon the character of Ruth and her interactions with the other male members of the family. On the other hand, critics with poststructuralist lenses have paid close attention to the play’s verbal structures and modes of characterisation to explore how it deconstructs normative gender roles and ideologically mediated social structures such as “family” and “home.” A close textual analysis of *The Homecoming* also shows that the play’s dramatic movement is almost entirely motivated by the mother’s absent figure. In light of the extensive theoretical and scholarly engagements that the play has attracted over the years, this short essay attempts to locate how the figure of the “Mother” acts as the central unifying axis in the play and, to this end, I examine how the six characters who appear onstage approach, engage and negotiate with the figure of the “Mother” at different points in the play.

From a purely biological perspective, motherhood comprises certain specific physiological functions. However, from a sociological perspective, motherhood might be perceived as an instinct as well as a role that can be both achieved and ascribed. In *The Homecoming*, at one point, the absent presence of the dead mother is celebrated and idolised; at another point, it is cursed and exorcised. The characters try to appropriate the idea of “motherhood” differently at different points in the play. They also compete among themselves to attain maternal favour or, perhaps even more shockingly, assume the role of the mother. The general attitude towards the archetypal Woman-as-Mother in the play, in a characteristically Pinteresque fashion, is notoriously difficult to pin down since it is constantly shifting and operates within the textual space in close proximity with parallel notions such as the “Woman-as-Wife” and the “Woman-as-Whore.” Though these notions or roles associated with the different facets of socially constructed “womanhood” are neither mutually exclusive nor interchangeable, they continue to substitute each other in the verbal articulations of the characters throughout the play.

The play’s focal point of all dramatic action is the absence of Jessie--the erstwhile woman of

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the house who was Max's wife, the sister-in-law to Max's brother Sam, and mother to three sons--Lenny, Joey, and Teddy. Though physically absent, her presence is felt overwhelmingly in the play through the ruminative recollections of other characters. Andrew David Clarke rightly observes, "Jessie hovers over the family, and indeed over the whole play, as if she were some kind of ghost or a spectre at the feast. Jessie is something both to be repelled from and frightened of" and she "is never provided with an opportunity to represent herself to the audience" (Clarke 37). It is precisely her overwhelming presence in the characters' minds that makes her physical absence uncanny. At the same time, the power she holds over the characters, even in her absence, turns her absence into a crisis--since she cannot be banished, she must be assimilated into the family. As I have indicated already, her power over the family is sustained primarily through memories. While memories play a crucial role in many of Pinter's major plays, it is almost impossible to construct a coherent narrative by piecing together memories alone, as ambiguity and contradiction are always involved. For example, in *The Homecoming*, Max praises and idolises the departed Jessie as a good wife and mother--a benevolent figure full of moral virtues--only to curse and abuse her moments later as a "slutbitch" and suggest that she was nothing but a whore with loose morals. This is a typical example of Pinteresque absurdity, where he uses language games to consciously challenge the possibility of attaining an objective perception of reality. Pinter's plays, in general, and *The Homecoming* in particular, exhibit "what appears to be" the reality at a specific moment is the closest possible approximation of "what is" the reality since, for Pinter, reality is not a static monolith but a constantly mutating, fractured, elusive, and illusory phenomenon.

The 'father-mother-child' axis is central to the normative bourgeois idea of family. Therefore, in the play, the quest for the absent mother becomes necessary for the characters to reinstate their family to its lost equilibrium. The never-ending series of verbal conflicts among the male members of the family trying to establish their masculinity is symptomatic of this imbalance since, in a patriarchal society, a man's masculinity requires validation from a woman. Since the woman is absent from the household we encounter in the play, the characters have created their own rational systems of justification for themselves through which they can seek reassurances about their masculinity even if they cannot resolve the conflicts within such systems of rational justification. Sam's claim of being a chauffeur par excellence, Max's expertise on horses, and Joey's insistence on being a rising star in boxing, accompanied by the language through which these are expressed, are all examples of such solipsistic self-contained systems. However, these systems are rendered vulnerable when Ruth arrives, and the existing status quo shifts again.

The Homecoming opens with a conflict between Max and his son Lenny over a pair of scissors, and their heated conversation reveals that Max, a man in his seventies who is also the patriarch of the family, has to reluctantly play the role of the mother who cooks and looks after his children. In other words, he is the primary motherly caregiver of the family, though he refuses to admit it. Max's desperate and forceful denial, "Who do you think I am, your mother?" (Pinter 16), reinforces the contrary and implicitly acknowledges his role. He speaks of childbirth in a language

that is noticeably feminine and more suited to a biological mother: "... don't talk to me about the pain of childbirth--I suffered the pain, I've still got the pangs--when I give a little cough my back collapses" (Pinter 47). It might be argued that Max internalises the role of the mother to fill up the vacuum within the domain of the family as a substitute for Jessie. According to Marc Silverstein, the above lines indicate "Max's movement from would-be representative of the father's law to embodiment of the woman as reproductive agent" (Silverstein 88).

However, Max can never fully assume the role of the mother or *be* the mother. Clarke aptly argues that though "Max claims to be able to fulfil any role a woman could offer... The only role missing from Max's speech is that of a sexual provider, and it is precisely this role that Max evidently wishes Ruth to fulfil" (39). Hence, Ruth's presence in the household is necessary to restore the family to its lost state of equilibrium. On the other hand, when Ruth finally assumes Max's chair at the end of the play, described by Elizabeth Sakellaridou as Ruth being "ceremoniously installed as a new matriarch in a family of men" (9), she replaces Max as the primary caregiver of the family and robs his status as the "acting mother." Ironically, his role as the patriarch--the man who holds power and authority over the family--is also diminished. This can also be read as the moment of his symbolic castration by Ruth, where he realises that he cannot be the object of Ruth's desire and collapses on the ground, symbolising the collapse of his masculine authority. His hysteria before the collapse is significant since hysteria--the word itself is derived from the Greek word for uterus--has always been regarded as a feminine disease stemming from sexual deprivation.

Sam's character is interesting in two ways. Firstly, he rarely engages in verbal duels with other male members of the family. Even when Max characteristically lashes out at him, his retaliations are brief, mild, and composed. Secondly, Sam's attitude towards Jessie, the erstwhile mother of the house, and Ruth, the most suitable replacement for Jessie, is markedly different from how the other characters perceive them. Until Joey and Lenny get physically intimate with Ruth in front of Teddy in the middle of the second act, Sam remains the only character who has come to recognise the Pinteresque mother in Jessie and Ruth. The Pinteresque mother is not and cannot be exclusively a mother, a wife, or a whore--she has to be an amalgamation of all three. Though all the male characters in the play have encountered Jessie as a mother and a wife, Sam is the only one who has witnessed Jessie-as-whore in the backseat of his car with Macgregor. However, he manages to fondly remember Jessie perhaps because, firstly, he stands outside the traditional father-mother-child dynamic of the bourgeois family and, consequently, he is perhaps the only one who understands and accepts that a mother can be more than a mother--she is a wife and can also be a whore.

Following this line of argument, it might be said that Teddy assumes a curious position. He was seemingly content with his life in America with a peaceful family and an established career as a professor of philosophy. He is eager to inform the other characters and the reader/spectator how Ruth is a dutiful and caring wife and mother. Yet he chose to return to his ancestral household with Ruth, which might be interpreted as Teddy's implicit desire to re-assume the position he had held before leaving the household. However, it can only be achieved through restoring the

mother in the house, which he realises only Ruth can fulfil. However, in Pinter's world, realisation stems from recognition through visual-verbal encounters. Therefore, even though the fundamental reason for Teddy's contentment with his life in America has been the presence of his wife Ruth as a substitute for his mother, his inaction upon seeing his wife's intimacy with his brothers is fuelled by the realisation that his brothers' actions are motivated by the same desire that he harbours, which is to inscribe Ruth as a caregiver--both maternal and erotic. His conspicuously feeble attempts to take Ruth away from his ancestral household by reminding her of her duties as a mother to his children in America lack motivation as much as Hamlet lacked the intent to kill Claudius, for taking Ruth away signifies suppression of his own latent desire to reinstate Jessie's household to its father-mother-children structure. At the end of the play, Teddy successfully comes to terms with Ruth as the archetypal Pinteresque woman who assumes multiple, contradictory, and seemingly incompatible roles, something Max had failed to do with Jessie.

Teddy's brothers Lenny, who is a pimp by profession and a philosopher by habit, and Joey, the demolisher-cum-boxer, betray symptoms of unresolved oedipal fixations throughout the play. Due to the absence of the mother, their desire for identification with the mother is frustrated, and this frustration manifests itself through their verbal slips, Lenny's hostility towards his father, and Joey's aggression in sexual encounters. Lenny's attitude towards his departed mother shows a peculiar ambivalence--neither can he satisfy his oedipal desire for the mother nor end his confinement within the oedipal domain by coming to terms with Jessie's absence. As an inevitable consequence, he wants to reclaim her and banish her at the same time. He directly confronts his father about his sexual relationship with his mother but prohibits Ruth from calling him by his full Christian name, 'Leonard', because it is what his mother used to call him. For Joey and Lenny, the arrival of Ruth serves two immediate interrelated purposes; their desire for identification with the mother through Jessie can now be successfully displaced to the figure of Ruth, and simultaneously, she becomes the site for the projection of their oedipal impulses. For Lenny and Joey, Ruth becomes the mother within the family's symbolic mesh, and, at the same time, they want to be the object of the (m) other's desire. However, Ruth refuses to be a passive object of desire--she asserts her control over men who initially attempt to control her. Despite spending a long time alone with Joey, she negates his attempts at seduction, making Lenny and Max wonder if she is a "tease." She only gets intimate with Lenny and Joey on the sofa in front of Teddy because she wishes to. However, soon, she withdraws rather whimsically and sends them to get food and drinks for her, to which they oblige like children obedient to their mother's wishes. Elizabeth Sakellaridou, in *Pinter's Female Portraits*, writes:

reception of Ruth in this male ménage is very ambiguous. Their male chauvinism dictates hate, abuse and sexual demands of the woman; their childishness induces them to plead for her motherly care and affection. In the end Ruth stays with the family, taking up the vacant place of the dead matriarch Jessie, whose memory is as respectfully relished as it is violently cursed by both husband and children...Ruth forces her way into it, demanding her rights, setting up her

terms, speaking her own language, establishing her real self. (Sakellaridou 108-109).

The very act of calling Lenny by his full Christian name "Leonard," the name used by Jessie, foreshadows Ruth's imminent usurpation of the role of the mother. It is worth noting that even though Ruth participates in the complex power relations within Jessie's household, she is canny enough not to reproduce the conditions of patriarchal dominance upon herself helplessly. In Ruth, Pinter arguably accomplishes the perfect juxtaposition of the maternal with the erotic. However, the Pinteresque mother can be benevolent and malevolent at once; she can be caring as well as seductive, and at the same time, she poses a threat since she can take recourse to violence if she wants to. During her first encounter with Lenny in the middle of the night, the words she uses to negate the advances of Lenny can be interpreted as both seductive counter-advancements and veiled threats of retribution:

Lenny: Just give me the glass.

Ruth: No.

(Pause)

Lenny: I'll take it, then.

Ruth: If you take the glass... I will take you.

(Pause)

Lenny: How about me taking the class without you taking me?

Ruth: Why don't I just take you?. Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass. Sit on my lap. Take a long cool sip. (She pats her lap. Pause. She stands, moves to him with the glass). Put your head back and open your mouth. (Pinter 33).

In conclusion, it might be said that, though Pinter's women characters are often criticised as "victimisers of their men, turning them into childish creatures who desire nothing more than to regress to the comfort of the womb" (Adler 377), such a line of criticism for women in *The Homecoming* would be over-simplified and reductive. *The Homecoming* is a play about Ruth's homecoming--the restoration of her fractured and repressed feminine self to a state of fulfilment through self-revelation. She describes her life in America: "It's all rock. And sand. It stretches... so far... everywhere you look" (Pinter 53). The language signifies a deep sense of deprivation and lack of fulfilment. Similarly, when she says she is "thirsty" (Pinter 35) but refuses to drink the water that is handed to her, one understands this "thirst" is also a metonymic representation of her quest for self-fulfilment, which can only be quenched by transgressing the strictly defined gender roles and fusing the different possibilities into one. Though the characters try to define, manipulate, and control the presence of the absent mother on their own terms, in the end, the mother in the form of Ruth moulds and exerts control over them. From this perspective, the fundamental conflict of the play is a conflict of ideas, the tendency of reducing and compartmentalising the mother in a fixed category and the mother's impulse to resist such strict categorisation, even if the question of whether this conflict finds resolution at the end of the play remains debatable. Pinter is not trying to accomplish a reconciliation of the conflicting elements--the brilliance of Pinter's theatricality lies in its ability to hold irreconcilable antagonisms into a form of colloid where the constituent elements become inseparable from each other, but they do not lose their ideological potency.

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