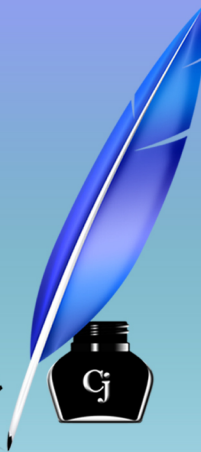


ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

June 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- III

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Harold Pinter's *Homecoming*: The Return To Roots

Rukhaya MK

Asst. Professor of English
Nehru College, Kasaragod,
Kerala.

Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* comes across as a regular Pinter play with a plot characterized by its deceptive simplicity, and replete with Pinteresque pauses. John Lahr called the play "a brilliantly sculpted event." The play deals with the theme of 'homecoming' as Teddy and Ruth return to England, their homeland after a period of six years to meet Ted's working-class family in North London. It is also a homecoming to their identities as Teddy has been living an educated existence in America and is now returning to his raw family life in North England. The story revolves around Max, a retired butcher and his three children Teddy, a professor in America; Lenny, the pimp and Joey, the amateur boxer. Max's brother Sam also lives with him. Teddy visits home after many years with his wife, Ruth while Teddy's family is unaware that Teddy is a married man with three kids. Max is initially reluctant as he equates all women with prostitutes and accuses Teddy of bringing home a 'tart'. However, as soon as Teddy announces that Ruth is his wife, Max accepts the fact. He hits Teddy first and then welcomes him to the household as he comes to terms with reality. Therefore, it is also a homecoming to relationships.

There are frequent references to Jessie, Max's wife and remarks pointing to her infidelity. The arrival of Ruth finds history repeating itself as she has affairs with Teddy's brothers- Lenny and Joey. Towards the end, we find the father-in-law Max also making sexual overtures to Ruth. All the characters in the drama *The Homecoming* thus come across as creatures of instincts. Man transcends right back to primitivism as he relies more on his sexual instincts, not keeping a check on the same that is characteristic of sophisticated society. All the characters in the drama transcend into primitivism as they openly exhibit their innermost desires that even the ones who witness it even find it acceptable and normal. In keeping with Stanley Fish's notion of Interpretative Communities where the dominant perspective reigns supreme. Teddy also does not appear to be visibly upset as he 'shares' his wife with his brothers in a stance critics called 'legalized prostitution'. Therefore, it is Man's homecoming to his nomadic roots. In each scene at least someone is dressed in pajamas highlighting the rawness of the situation. With regards to critics who have pointed out suggestions that Ruth was a prostitute before she got married to Ted, the story signifies the homecoming of Ruth to her previous profession.

The play is also a homecoming to the past as most characters keep talking about themselves in terms of the past or define themselves with reference to the past. Memories rule the roost. All their identities are deep rooted and intertwined with the past as Max constantly makes references to memories or Ruth refers to her past as a 'model'. As Derrida pointed out, the word 'model' is

ambiguous in its reference in that it refers to both the original as well as duplicate. It evokes connotations of transcending from the unreal to the real or vice versa. Max's misogynistic stance is rooted in his past experiences. The past often functions here as a standard to measure the present. Lenny portrays himself as a 'hard nut to crack' as he relates to Ruth evidences in the past of a woman making advances towards him that he resisted.

The play also focuses on power-politics where the father-brother-son trio strive for power. Their definition of power- is where might is right and in being successful in 'flooring' a woman. Irving Wardle states in his *The Territorial Struggle* that the play has to be seen as "a ritualized tournament in which the two instincts of sexual desire and territorial aspiration fight it out." These attempts at establishing their masculinity is their assertion of power. Esslin referred to *The Homecoming* in psychoanalytical terms, as a drama of Oedipal sexual conflict between fathers and sons. Gender power-politics with reference to the man/woman binary pair is apparent in the play in that two people are never equal in a relationship. Owing to his 'supposed' manipulation of the woman in *Homecoming* critics over the years have labeled Pinter as a misogynist. However, the woman, in fact, is the centre of attraction here as she controls all the characters in the play, and all the characters are attracted to her. She makes the luxurious demand of a three room apartment, maid, wardrobe to which the men-folk agree. Therefore, she does have a 'choice' and is not forced to stay here making a living at her own free will; there is no compulsion regarding her staying back leaving her husband Teddy and the kids back in America. It is very significant that Ruth has an option to stay or not, and to opt for prostitution as her profession or not. She has no financial constraints as she is the wife of a professor. She is not compelled by any of the men folk; and it is in her power to accept it or reject it. She invites a kind of freedom into her own life where she earns, and is her own master.

Emily Hoffman in her essay "The Ruth Puzzle" claims how Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* left her husband and children and shut the door behind her, the sound of which was a pointer to the women of the future. In the play *Homecoming*, Ruth leaves her husband and three kids to stay in England for brighter prospects. But here the stance of Ruth has been questioned by readers and critics alike. The woman here dominates in terms of sex and gender. She physically satisfies the men at her own whims, and also endeavors to give them emotional companionship that only a woman in the house can offer. She thus transforms into the archetypal woman, the one that is a combination of a wife and a mother-figure. Thus she fits aptly into the gap that Jessie had left open many years back. Ruth's sexual freedom has to be seen as an assertion of her individuality in a patriarchal set up where men rule the roost. Martin Esslin's comment about a completely respectable woman accepting such a proposition with complete nonchalance, has to be viewed in a wider context. To substantiate, Harold Pinter said in an interview in the *Saturday Review*: "At the end of the play she's 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."

The feeling of the absence of a woman in the house or the nostalgia for feminine qualities is quite apparent in Max calling Sam a 'bitch', telling his sons that he gave birth to them from his

womb and the effeminate way in which he describes how he used to 'tuck up' his sons in bed while they were little.

Lack of communication is an important aspect in the play that Pinter symbolizes with his hallmark pauses and silences. "A pause in Pinter is as important as a line. They are all there for a reason. Three dots is a hesitation, a pause is a fairly mundane crisis and a silence is some sort of crisis." There are two kinds of silences in Pinter: The one where no word is spoken, and the one where a torrent of language or lies falls into place to hide some sort of silence or truth/lies. This language makes them understand without being understanding, and makes one misunderstand one more, than one understands the other in a relationship. In *The Homecoming*, Ruth is barely discernible in her ellipses, nonsequiturs and disarming physical actions, according to Hoffman. The dislocation of language also plays a major part in the theme of lack of communication. The raw mentality of Teddy's family cannot comprehend his 'learned lectures'. The Standard Dialect is a powerful insignia of classy civilization that compels one to conform. The family's undressed language, coupled with Teddy's code switching techniques are also attempts at subverting standardization, and returning to one's roots.

Works Cited:

Esslin, Martin. *The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter*. London: Methuen, 1970. ISBN 0-416-10910-1 (10).

Hoofman, Emily. "The Ruth Puzzle". *Words on Plays*. New York: American Conservatory Theater, 2011.

Lahr, John. "Demolition Man: Harold Pinter and 'The Homecoming'". *The New Yorker* 24 Dec. 2007, "Onward and Upward with the Arts". Accessed 16 April 2013.

Wardle, Irving. "The Territorial Struggle." In Lahr, A Casebook on Harold Pinter's "The Homecoming," 37-44.