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Gender in British Theatre: From Modern Drama to Harold Pinter's The Homecoming

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Like modern dramatists Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg, Harold Pinter challenges traditional family structures and male structures of authority within his writing. However, Pinter's deep understanding of power allows him to stage gender conflict in a more nuanced way than his predecessors.

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Conversations around gender and women's rights emerged as a major theme in British theatre in the late 19th century, reflecting the social and political climate. The word "feminism" first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1852 and feminist movements began emerging in Britain and Scandinavia around the same time. British feminists focused primarily on legal issues relating to marriage, including property rights and access to divorce. In response to their work, a law was passed in Britain to facilitate divorce in 1857. As feminist ideas emerged and women gained new freedoms, many writers described the emergence of a "New Woman." For this new type of woman, marriage and motherhood were no longer the only options. These women were more educated, more aware of their rights, and more sexually liberated than women had been in Britain up to this point .

With these rapid changes, many playwrights of the time began to address gender issues in their plays. This period of theatre, called Modern Drama, was characterized by the emergence of realism and plays centering around fights for power between men and women. The most influential of these plays was Henrick Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). The play centers around Nora and Torvald as they navigate their marriage and a secret Nora has been keeping. In the last scene, Nora drops the act of the perfect housewife and tells Torvald that she is unhappy in their uneven partnership, ultimately walking out the door, leaving her marriage and family. August Strindberg was another notable playwright who expressed anxieties about feminism and the roles of women through his plays. His 1888 play *Miss Julie* follows the lead of *A Doll's House,* showing a fight for power between a wealthy young woman and a male servant she has an affair with. Strindberg's *The Father* (1887) is another fight for power, this time between a father and mother for control over their daughter's education. In that play, Strindberg expresses anxieties about the power of motherhood and the lack of control men have within the family unit. The plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, and other playwrights of the time both responded to and influenced the conversations around gender happening in Britain.

Almost half a decade later, with the end of World War II, gender again became a major social issue in Britain. The war had disrupted traditional family life, with many women working as men fought, legitimizing the idea of a working mother (Sastre 6). This raised the consciousness of British women, and many became more aware of injustices they faced (Wyllie 9). Following the war, divorce rates were rising, many European countries were making strides in women's rights legislation, and perceptions of sexuality were evolving quickly. With these rapid changes, gender, sexuality, and family again became a focal point of public discourse (Sastre 5). In his book, *Sex on Stage: Gender and Sexuality in Post-war British Theatre*, Andrew Wyllie points out the "radical insecurity about gender and sexuality" this discourse created in men, and argues that one of the primary ways this insecurity was brought to the surface was through theatre (Wyllie 45). In regards to the

relationship between gender and theatre, Wyllie says:

> changes in cultural attitudes have affected the nature of the theatre, resulting in a continuing dialectical relationship between the theatre and the society in which it operates. The theatre has also been a gendered space, and a place in which gender conflict stages itself, consciously or unconsciously (Wyllie, 11).

Throughout the book, Wyllie assesses different positions on gender politics in postwar British theatre.

One of the most prominent British playwrights featured in Wyllie's book is Harold Pinter. Born and raised in London, Pinter began his career as an actor in the 1940s. He debuted as a playwright in 1957 with *The Room*. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, he wrote his most well-known plays including *The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming,* and *Betrayal*. Starting in the 1970s, he also directed many of his own works. Along with his plays, he also wrote multiple radio and television dramas and screenplays. He was also known for his political activism throughout his career. In 2005, Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Pinter's work has been described as a "theatre of menace" for its morally ambiguous characters, subtext-heavy dialogue, and explorations of power. He is known for "Pinter pauses," as his dialogue is filled with pauses and failures to communicate, which often communicate more than the text itself. In *Gender and Power in the Plays of Harold Pinter*, Victor L. Cahn describes Pinter's plays as a game or battle, in which the characters struggle for power and emotional security (Cahn 5). Pinter's gender battles can be seen to continue the work of modern dramatists like Ibsen and Strindberg, who were the first to bring modern conversations about gender to the stage.

Among scholars, there is a lot of debate over the way Pinter addresses gender. Some accuse him of misogyny due to the violent language his characters use against women and the archetypes his female characters fall into. Cahn quotes notable drama scholar Alrene Sykes as saying, "'Does Pinter say anything more about women than that they are mothers, wives, and whores? Not, I think, a great deal" (Cahn 6). Cahn himself disagrees with Sykes' analysis, arguing that the relationships between Pinter's male and female characters are multidimensional and significant (Cahn 6). Many scholars agree that in his portrayal of power struggles, Pinter recognizes and explores power dynamics between men and women. However, within this exploration of power, many have argued that Pinter responds more to masculine anxieties about gender than to gender issues themselves. Wyllie says that Pinter deals with a "universal masculine angst" (Wyllie 66) and describes his response to gender issues as "menacing clearsightedness" (Wyllie 45). Cahn adds to this idea that the issues of identity, uncertainty, and danger in Pinter's plays impact the male characters far more than they do the female characters. While male characters struggle with their own views of themselves and of the women around them, the female characters "operate with an understanding of their own bodies and minds and therefore their own desires" and "have insight into male behavior and thought" (Cahn 7). By this reasoning, Cahn and many other scholars argue that despite the sexism on the surface of Pinter's plays, Pinter's female characters are complex and powerful, though not the focus of Pinter's work.

One of Pinter's most discussed plays in regards to his portrayal of gender is *The Homecoming*, first produced in 1965. The play centers around Teddy, a professor in America, who returns to London to introduce his wife, Ruth, to his family. The rough, working-class family consists of Teddy's father, Max, his brothers Lenny and Joey, and Max's brother Sam. The men in the family struggle for power and compete for Ruth's attention, as there hasn't been a woman in the house since the death of Max's wife Jessie. Ultimately, the men of the family propose that Ruth should stay with them in London, working as a live-in prostitute for the family. Ruth negotiates her living conditions and ultimately agrees to the proposal, remaining in the house surrounded by the men of the family as Teddy returns to London.

Ruth is one of Pinter's most prominent female characters, and her role in the play is highly contested among scholars. Initial responses to the play largely condemned Ruth. In her paper "Ruth: Pinter's *The Homecoming* Revisited," Penelope Prentice calls her "the most misunderstood of all of Harold Pinter's characters,", and says that she has been "condemned as a shocking, licentious woman, even a nymphomaniac…" (Prentice 458). Even recently, in a 2022 review for *The Guardian*, drama critic Michael

Billington recognizes the controversial nature of the play and the character, predicting that a production of the show will spark a debate over "whether Ruth is a sexual victim or a vanquisher of toxic masculinity" (Billington). Prentice argues for the latter, arguing that Ruth maintains strength and power throughout the play, not allowing men to dominate her (Prentice 459). Prentice ultimately concludes that, "Ruth comes closest of all of Pinter's characters to a model of virtue, one whose strength is threatened and tested from without, but who understands her circumstances and the people around her, and who then acts wisely to gain the best available end" (Prentice 475). This conclusion is far more forgiving than many readings of *The Homecoming,* but many do agree on Ruth's strength as a character. In their defense of her decision to leave her family, Prentice and other scholars have compared Ruth to Nora in *A Doll's House,* praising her as a woman who leaves an unhappy and controlling marriage (Prentice 464) (Billington).

However, the portrayal of Ruth is not the only major factor in *The Homecoming*'s exploration of gender. Many of the most prominent themes and ideas surrounding gender come from the male characters in the play, their language, and their relationships with Ruth and each other. Wyllie describes *The Homecoming* as "An edgy, nervous acceptance of change… in which ambiguity and veiled threats serve as an exposé of the shortcomings of competitive masculine relationships…" (Wylie 10). Some of the most striking ways Pinter explores masculine anxieties about gender are through his portrayal of male homosocial relationships, the male view of women as mothers and whores, and the idea of sexuality as power. These themes are prominent in *The Homecoming,* though they can also be found in many of his other plays.

In "Exploring Gender Roles In The 60s: Ann Jellicoe's 'The Knack' And Harold Pinter's 'The Homecoming,'" Mireia Aragay Sastre argues that *The Homecoming* can be read with a focus on male homosocial relationships. In the paper, she uses Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of male homosociality, defined as " …the whole spectrum of bonds between men, including friendship, mentorship, rivalry, institutional genitality, and economic exchange - within which the various forms of the traffic in women take place" (Sastre 7). Within these relationships, women are treated as objects and become a tool as men negotiate their relationships with each other. This concept is clear in Pinter's portrayal of the family in *The Homecoming*.

From the first moments of *The Homecoming*, it's clear that the male homosocial family structure is fragile. Throughout the first scene, we see Max struggling to maintain his patriarchal role in a family of all men. He's challenged by his son Lenny, who calls him a "daft prat" (Pinter 23) and tells him he's "getting demented" (Pinter 25). To maintain his power, he calls Lenny a "bitch," threatens him with physical violence, and continues to emphasize his status as Lenny's father (Pinter 27). Later on in the play, Max even feminizes himself, saying he "gave birth to three grown men…" (Pinter 56), attempting to raise his status to that of a mother figure. Despite his clear attempts to maintain power within the family, Max also contradicts himself often. While sometimes he uses his role as a father to gain status, at other moments he tells Lenny to "stop calling me Dad" (Pinter 33). These contradictions further emphasize the confused nature of the homosocial relationships within the family. Despite the instability of these male relationships, it's clear that Max is not the only family member who is trying to maintain them. In a later conversation with Teddy, Lenny says, "there's no question that we live a less rich life here than you do over there. We live a closer life… we do make up a unit, Teddy, and you're an integral part of it…" (Pinter 81). This is an explicit recognition of the importance of the family unit despite the conflict we've already seen between Lenny and other members of the family. It makes clear that, despite the struggle for power, it is important to the male characters that the homosocial family structure is maintained.

When Ruth is introduced into this family dynamic, the men make her into an object to exchange. This is clear from the first moments of Ruth's conversation with Lenny, where he doesn't acknowledge that she is Teddy's wife. She tells him that they're married multiple times, but he still asks if they're traveling together and if she lives with him in America (Pinter 45). The objectification of Ruth as an object of exchange is the most clear, however, when the men start to discuss the possibility of her staying with the family rather than returning to America with her husband. While Ruth is not in the room, they discuss her as if she is a family investment. They talk through how much money it will cost for her to live there, what types of accommodations she'll need, and how to afford her. Lenny offers to take her to "Greek Street" to earn money for the family as a prostitute, to which Max agrees (Pinter 87).

When they tell Joey this part of the plan, he protests, saying "I didn't think I was going to have to share her!" To this, Max responds "Well, you are going to have to share her! Otherwise she goes straight back to America. You understand?" (Pinter 89). This negotiation between father and son reads like a parent reasoning with a child over a new toy. The idea of "sharing" her explicitly points to her being an object for exchange in the eyes of the family. During this exchange, they also continue to diminish the fact that she is Teddy's wife (that is, they ignore the idea that she is somehow Teddy's object to possess) and go as far to reconstruct her identity by giving her a different name. Lenny suggests giving her a trade name as a prostitute, declaring, "we'd call her something else. Dolores, or something," to which Max replies, "or Spanish Jacky" (Pinter 90). This shows their clear disregard for her identity and makes clear that, to them, she is a means to an end. Even Teddy participates in the objectification of his own wife, with his only counterargument to the arrangement being that "she'd get old… very quickly" (Pinter 90). Ultimately, Teddy is the one who proposes the plan to Ruth. Sastre explains Teddy's participation in this exchange as a necessary part of maintaining the homosocial relationships with his family. The transfer of Ruth to the family, Sastre says, mitigates the class issues between Teddy and his family after he had gained upward mobility, changing the power structures of the family (Sastre 13).

The exchange of Ruth is complicated, however, by her own participation in it. Despite the attempts of the family, Ruth's role "is not simply that of a passive conduit" (Sastre 13). When the idea is proposed to her, she immediately starts negotiating the terms of the agreement, addressing her living situation, conveniences, and money. She demands more than the family initially offers, and they cave to all of her demands. When Ruth is satisfied with their answers, she agrees only
under strict conditions:

> RUTH: I would naturally want to draw up an inventory of everything I would need, which would require your signatures in the precedence of witnesses.
> LENNY: Naturally.
> RUTH: All aspects of the agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified to our mutual satisfaction before we finalized the contract.
> LENNY: Of course.
> *Pause.*
> RUTH: Well, it might prove a workable arrangement." (Pinter 93)

In this negotiation, it is clear that Ruth understands the dynamics of this family and is able to participate in their game. She is not shocked by the proposal, nor does she agree to it easily, she instead meets them on their own terms to gain better living conditions for herself. Ruth's participation in this exchange in many ways challenges the idea that she is an object in the maintenance of their homosocial relationships. This challenge of the male social system from Ruth is, perhaps, a part of Pinter's criticism of masculine power structures and anxieties.

Many scholars also point out Oedipal themes in Pinter's work, with many of his male characters viewing women as only mothers or whores. These views are apparent, but also complicated, in *The Homecoming.* Anita R. Osherow explores this in her paper "Mother and Whore: The Role of Woman in *The Homecoming."* She points out that both Ruth and Jessie, Max's dead wife who he references often, "demonstrate a strange dichotomy in the concept of the female as both vacillate between the role of mother and the role of whore" (Osherow 423). On this point, Wyllie quotes Michael Billington, who suggests that Ruth is Pinter's response to the question "'what if these categories exist within the same woman?'" (Wyllie 67).

Some scholars don't like the categorizations of mother and whore at all, and some read it as misogyny on Pinter's part. Prentice says it's "commonplace" and "unenlightening to label Ruth a wife-mother-whore" (Prentice 466). However, if you consider that Pinter may be commenting on male anxieties, not women themselves, this idea is worth examining. Osherow focuses on the ambiguity of the men's views on women, as they "hate and fear women yet know they need her." She clarifies that the construction of the women as mothers and whores has nothing to do with the women themselves, saying "Ruth and Jessie may or may not have been whores; what is important is that they are thought of as such" (Osherow 431). Sastre, too, focuses

on the mens' constructions of the women, pointing out how Max "verbally constructs and reconstructs [Jessie] along the traditional mother/whore dichotomy to suit the shifting requirements of the struggle to recover his patriarchal position within the current all-male family arrangement" (Sastre 16). In this way, the construction of the women within these roles also contributes to the dynamics of the male homosocial relationships.

Max's construction of women as mothers/whores is especially apparent the first time he meets Ruth. When Teddy introduces Ruth, Max reacts poorly, calling her a "dirty tart" (Pinter 57). He is appalled that she's been in the house without his knowledge and says "We've had a smelly scrubber in my house all night. We've had a stinking pox-ridden slut in my house all night" (Pinter 57). Despite Teddy telling Max multiple times that Ruth is his wife, Max continues, saying "I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died" (Pinter 58). This line is especially interesting, since he doesn't only construct Ruth as a whore, but immediately compares her to Jessie, who he also calls a whore. Max finally comes around to Ruth after asking "You a mother?" to which she responds that she has three sons. His perception of her turns on a dime, and the next time he talks about her he calls her a "nice feminine girl with proper credentials" (Pinter 65).

He describes Jessie in a similar way to Ruth, making clear that this is his construction of all women. Early in the second act, Max describes an idyllic memory of domestic happiness, painting Jessie as the perfect wife and mother, saying "...I left a woman at home with a will of iron, a heart of gold, and a mind" (Pinter 62). This construction of Jessie serves his bid for power in that moment, as he's trying to convey the picture of a perfect family with himself as the patriarch. On the next page, his tactic changes and he grasps for power by trying to gain Ruth's sympathy. He laments that he had, "a crippled family, three bastard sons, a slutbitch of a wife…" (Pinter 63). Within the same conversation, he completely changes his construction of his family and Jessie depending on what better suits him. It's clear that, like his view of Ruth, his view of Jessie was a confused construction of a mother, a whore, or something between the two.

Ruth is not able to escape Max's construction of her, but, much like the way she uses her objectification, she uses the male perception of the mother/whore dichotomy to her advantage (Sastre 16). Sastre describes Ruth's situation as a "disabling dualism," in which she has to reject one end of the dichotomy by embracing the other. In Ruth's case, she rejects her role as a wife and mother in America to embrace the role of whore that the men of the family have created for her. Still, by leaning into this role and her own sexuality, she is able to gain power over the men in the play. We see the power of Ruth's sexuality applied subtly throughout the play. For example, in her first conversation with Lenny, they have this exchange over her glass of water:

> LENNY: Just give me the glass.
> RUTH: No.
> *Pause.*
> LENNY: I'll take it, then.
> RUTH: If you take the glass… I'll take you.
> *Pause.*
> LENNY: You're joking…
> …
> RUTH: Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass.
> *He is still.*
> 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.
> LENNY: Take that glass away from me.
> RUTH: Lie on the floor. Go on. I'll pour it down your throat.
> LENNY: What are you doing, making me some kind of proposal? (50)

Up to this point in the conversation, Lenny has asserted power over Ruth, right up to the point where he tells her to give him the glass. By saying "I'll take you," Ruth completely disarms him. He expects

to be able to treat her like a whore, but he doesn't expect her to own her sexuality in that way. By telling him to sit on her lap and to lie on the floor, she further asserts dominance over him, sliding easily between the roles of whore, lover, and mother.

By the end of the play, Ruth has negotiated a place for herself within the male power structures of the family, leaned into Max's view of her within the mother/whore dichotomy, and used her sexuality to gain power and control over the men. In the last moments of the play, Teddy leaves to return to America and Ruth has taken possession of Max's armchair at the center of the room, with Joey kneeling at her feet, Sam lying on the floor, and Max and Lenny behind her. This is an incredibly powerful stage picture, which places Ruth at the center of the family, in the patriarch's chair, and seemingly in total control. In the last moments of the play, Max continues to grasp for power, berating her and ultimately begging her to "kiss me," but it's clear that his words have no impact on her (Pinter 98).

The end of the play is still somewhat ambiguous, though it's clear Ruth is a central, and potentially very powerful figure in whatever future will transpire. Scholarly interpretations of Ruth's ending vary. Prentice argues that Ruth is very powerful in this moment, saying that she hasn't agreed to anything and has secured a better life for herself. She quotes Pinter himself, who said about Ruth, "She does not become a harlot," and "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" (Prentice 458). Wyllie takes a more complex view. Though he agrees that Ruth is central and powerful in the last moment, he points out that in order to maintain that power she has to maintain the "idealization of the madonna/whore icons, conventional constructs of womanhood by men" (Wyllie 68). In many ways, this dilemma characterized women's emerging sexuality in the 1960s, and it still impacts women today.

In looking at *The Homecoming*, we can see that Pinter's writing reflects the discourse around gender, sexuality, and family that was happening at the time. Though some audiences and critics have read his work as misogynistic, it's clear that his work engages more with male anxieties than it does with ideas about women themselves. Many of his female characters are less a reflection of what Pinter thinks of women and more a reflection of how men view and construct women. Pinter takes after modern playwrights like Ibsen and Strindberg, who similarly used their plays to think through issues of gender and power. Like Ibsen and Strindberg, Pinter challenges traditional family structures and male structures of authority within his writing. However, Pinter's deep understanding of power allows him to stage gendered conflicts in a more nuanced way than his predecessors. This complex response to gender issues would not have been possible without the previous generations of playwrights, who opened up the dialogue about gender in theatre spaces and started staging the issues that Pinter would eventually address.

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