



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

“You lovely whore”:

***The Portrayal of Women in Harold Pinter’s Plays Night School,
The Lover and The Homecoming***

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Guðrún Baldvina Sævarsdóttir

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Abstract

This essay looks at the portrayal of women in Harold Pinter's plays *Night School*, *The Lover* and *The Homecoming* in an effort to analyse how they are portrayed and how they change from play to play. All three plays under discussion were written in the early 1960s and all deal with the double identity or split character roles of the woman. This portrayal of the duality of the woman is a recurring theme in Pinter's plays. Underneath various exteriors, many of his women reveal themselves to be sexually promiscuous yet without obvious censure from the playwright. I have therefore adopted the term "lovely whore" to describe this aspect of their character, the phrase Pinter uses as the final lines of *The Lover*. From 1960 to 1964, this character was rendered with more precision and focus in Pinter's plays, accumulating into one of his most powerful characters, Ruth in *The Homecoming*. This coincides with the rise of the second wave of feminism, a social movement that focused on women's liberation and freedom of choice. During this time, Pinter explored the domestic, sexual and professional aspect of the woman, juxtaposing his female characters with male characters who struggle with the females in order to overpower them and inflict their will upon them. The character portraits rendered are of strong, independent women who prevail through conflict with the men in their lives and are able to retain their roles and harmonize them within their character. Although Pinter himself denied having a political agenda in writing these plays, they clearly deal with both gender and power within a domestic setting and subsequently carry a strong sexually political subtext. Thus, these three plays are marked by an attempt to resolve the issues that rose in the wake of the woman's choice movement, and viewed in context, they render a feminist approach to the multiple roles of women and the men's need to harmonize them in each character.

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Introduction

“I don’t know what the hell he’s talking about” was Harold Pinter’s reply when asked to comment on a certain critic’s rather overly academic statement on modern playwriting (qtd. in Wellwarth 96). Throughout his career Pinter refrained from participating in any sort of analysis of his work and rarely commented on meaning in his own plays.

However, his attitude towards criticism and analysis has not stopped numerous critics, academics and writers all over the world in their suggestions on interpretation, critical analysis and academic research. It is worth noting that despite his unwilling attitude towards partaking in critical analysis, he was often more than willing to discuss his writing process, the characters in his plays and even their structure (Billington 131-132).

In his Nobel Lecture titled *Art, Truth & Politics* he stated:

Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. [. . .] But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. [. . .] Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost. (*The Essential Pinter* 1)

He then goes on to explain how two of his plays came about, *The Homecoming* and *Old Times*. According to these examples he neither had a structure in mind for these plays or the characters inhabiting them nor an agenda for the plays to state anything in particular. They merely happened, within the writing process, or perhaps in spite of it (*The Essential Pinter* 2). Where a writer’s inspiration or material comes from will not be the object of this essay nor will the writing process of Harold Pinter. However, the plays do have the writer in common and since he is their lowest possible denominator it is worth

noting what he contributes to this discussion. The writer's disposition and his descriptions of his technique make it difficult to assert that there is a determined and structured meaning or subtext in his work or that his characters fit a pre-determined form which he re-uses in play after play. Whatever his intentions or methods, it is thoroughly recognised that Pinter's plays have a recognizable tone, structure, language and even share similar subject matter.

One much debated issue in his plays concerns Pinter's female portraits. His plays often include verbal and physical violence within a domestic setting, portray women as sexually promiscuous and are subsequently loaded with misogynistic dialogues. As a result Harold Pinter's plays are regularly criticized for encouraging sexual discrimination and being charged with chauvinism. But meaning is not all portrayed or conveyed merely through words but also through atmosphere, timing and continuum which often work towards creating a strong subtext of meaning.

Despite the brutality of his dialogues and his frequent use of derogatory words towards women, there is a sense that there is more to these female characters than victimisation or sexual slavery. From a career spanning over fifty years, there are thirty two plays in the Pinter canon. Some were written for television, some for radio but most were written for the theatre. In some cases the same play was rewritten or revised for a different medium. They vary in form, character portrayal and subject but all of them deal in some way with power and communication and more often than not, lack of power and communication. In different periods of his career, he deals with different topics and his plays can be broadly categorized by subject matter, which often coincides with certain time frames. This essay will focus on three plays from the early 60s, a

period in Pinter's career where his female characters progress towards focused character portraits of socially capable and functional whores.

The first chapter will look at Pinter's sexual politics throughout his career, with emphasise on the 1960s to arrive at the conclusion that the female dichotomy was a recurring and progressive subject in his plays. This section will also look at the social landscape of the early 1960s, as well as Pinter's personal life at the time. The following chapters will then examine the female characters of three of Pinter's plays; *Night School*, *The Lover* and *The Homecoming* and focus mainly on the structure of these female characters, how they are constructed and what strengths and weaknesses they appear to have. Furthermore the essay will look at the male characters' behaviour towards these women in an effort to show that Pinter is in fact benevolent towards the women in his plays whereas the male characters are often subjected to harsher moral judgement.

Looking at the portrayal of the woman as whore in Harold Pinter's plays *Night School*, *The Lover* and *The Homecoming* the character portrait rendered is one of power and personal harmony whereas their male counterparts lack those very characteristics.

Pinter's Sexual Politics

In her book *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic*, Penelope Prentice argues that Pinter's plays fly in the face of the previously prevailing idea that humans are essentially powerless beings awaiting their fate (xvii). Thus the theme of the paralysis of the human psyche, widely discussed in modernist literature, is now attacked with Pinter's recurring power plays between individuals (Prentice, *Pinter Ethic* xviii). Power, where it comes from and how it is gained, is essentially Pinter's most prominent subject. When this war of power is fought between individuals of different gender, the fight inevitably becomes sexual and political at the same time.

Harold Pinter's sexual politics is a widely discussed subject and for good reason since he is equally controversial and ambiguous in his sexual politics as in other aspects of his work. Looking through his body of work there are two obvious recurring themes concerning sexual politics; the woman as the alien other and the idolisation of male bonding. From his novel *The Dwarfs*, written early in his career, (begun in 1952), which focused on the relationship of three men and one woman, the theme of the duality of the woman emerged. This dual portrait usually includes one role of the woman being or alluding to that of the prostitute, such as Virginia in *The Dwarfs* or Rose in *The Room*. Another recurring female portrait is that of the oppressive mother figure such as Meg in *The Birthday Party* and Albert's mother in *A Night Out*. The latter group is usually less sympathetic and more alien than the whore, even in the earlier plays when the whore lacks the dignity and sophistication of later plays. In *A Night Out*, written in 1959, those characters are lined up to juxtapose Albert, who gains the audience's sympathy in dialogues with his mother due to her extremely manipulating and unappealing nature. But with his violent and anti-social behaviour, in his dialogue with

the more sympathetic whore, Albert is portrayed as a dangerous and unpredictable character. In their struggle to overpower the woman, the men are rendered vulnerable and powerless. Albert in this case is a grown man, feebly attempting to free himself from his mother's oppression, but is uncomfortably immature enough to resort to verbal and physical abuse. During the early 1960s, Pinter further explored the dichotomy of the woman in his plays, and all of the six plays written from 1960-64 concern this split female character in one way or another. That is not to say that this is the only type of female character created by Pinter in this period, but it is undeniably a theme belonging to this decade and which occurs in very similar form again and again (Billington 135).

According to Elizabeth Sakellariou in her book *Pinter's Female Portraits*, there is an obvious tendency in Pinter's men to view the females as threatening or malevolent, as beings they must reject and be rid of from their social surroundings (18). This is evident in the ongoing struggle of men and women in his plays and the constant verbal assaults in search of power and victory over the other. Although the women engage in them, the need for this power struggle comes from the male characters and the battle is usually initiated by them. Although their women counterparts enter into these battles, they have no initial need for power and do not seem to experience lack of it. They are the enigma that the men try to resolve. Their function in the men's lives and their part within the patriarchy is what needs to be asserted and even though their roles are not necessarily clearer by the end of the play, it is clear that the women are empowered to assign their own roles, whatever those roles may be. Their personal strength and confidence will insure them their independence.

The 1960s witnessed a great rise of feminism around the world, culminating in what is usually called the second wave of feminism ("women's movement"). Women's

rights and social standing became a hot topic of discussion during this time. The accepted identity of the 50s housewife underwent ideological attacks and attitude towards women were subsequently undergoing radical change (Nicholson 1-2). The idea of a clearly defined role of the woman within the home was torn down and new roles were being implemented. If the ideal woman wasn't a dedicated housewife with a calling limited to housekeeping and raising children, then who was she? Considering the questions that surfaced due to this upsurge of feminism, the diversity of the woman seems a natural topic for a contemporary playwright to explore. Or as Linda Nicholson put it in her book *The Second Wave* "Something happened in the 1960s in ways of thinking about gender that continues to shape public and private life" (1). The 60s and 70s were also a time that saw revisions of British legislation concerning the social status of women from being protective to permissive (Storry and Childs 121). Thus laws such as the Divorce Reform Act, Equal Pay and the Sex Discrimination Act were all passed during this time (Storry and Childs 131). The literal and symbolic role-playing Pinter's female characters of the 60s experience often relates closely to the male characters attempts to harmonise their ideal woman. The male struggle to part the lustful mistress from the respectable housewife was undeniably a recurring theme during this time but it need not be so particular for Harold Pinter since it was likely a topic all men were aware of at the time.

The fact that Pinter chose to explore men's attempts towards harmonising multiple identities of women characters may have been due to a more personal issue in his life (Billington 133). It is an interesting fact that all three characters were first performed by Pinter's wife at the time, Vivien Merchant. Many have pondered over the importance of their marriage on his writings and the relevance of her being typecast as

the typical Pinter-female. The writer has firmly denied any link between these elements on his work but it is very hard to overlook the fact that a married playwright continuously wrote plays where an attempt is made to explore the duality of the woman within a domestic setting, and that these parts all seemed tailored for his actress wife Merchant. The decline in their marriage also coincides with the rise in this exploration of female characters in Pinter's plays and in 1962, the same year he wrote *The Lover*, Pinter began an affair with another woman (Billington 133).

Contemporary culture of the 1960s was relatively involved in the feminist zeitgeist of its time and brought up numerous, valid questions on the topic of equal rights. Socio-political work, aimed at stirring up a discussion or refreshing a way we see things usually comes across as shocking. But what seemed shocking in the 1960s rarely retains that characteristic half a century later. Why then do Pinter's almost fifty year old plays about gender power struggles and women's roles, still leave audiences bewildered and uncomfortable and even more often shocked and outraged? It seems to be the moral and ethical ambiguity with which he explores these themes. Although he refrains from being judgmental about his characters, they are often engaged in socially unacceptable activities. Pinter seems to stroll through the social minefield of domestic violence, criminal behaviour, verbal abuse and promiscuity without the pre-existent ethical ruler of his time. After observing something morally wrong and extremely uncomfortable, the audience is never afforded the pleasure of condemnation and punishment of the characters involved. Instead, many turn to the playwright that offered such a vague portrayal of unacceptable activity with their need for resolve and assertion of their own moral values. Some even went so far as to write about Pinter's personal morals, such as historian Geoffrey Alderman in his editorial for *Current View Point*:

Whatever his merit as a writer, actor and director, on an ethical plane Harold Pinter seems to me to have been intensely flawed, and his moral compass deeply fractured. For the sake of posterity someone had better say this, and if no-one else will, then it had better be me.

Until fairly late in his career, Pinter claimed his plays were not political and that they had no embedded message for the masses (Pinter 2.ix-x). In an interview with Mireia Aragay and Ramon Simo in 1996 he revised this assertion and stated that his early plays might have had a political message but added that it was never his initial aim or intention (90-3). Intentional or not, they do provoke audiences to think about their own moral judgements and the need for their own moral clarity.

In the aforementioned interview, Pinter was asked about the recurring characters in his plays where his men are brutal and violent and the women are enigmatic and mysterious. Asked if they were not rather stereotypical he replied in true Pinter fashion “Possibly” (93). He then went on to claim that as patronising as it might sound, he believed women to be created in better form than men but that he did not sentimentalise them for it, adding “I think women are very tough” (94). After acknowledging the fact that women had exercised brutality in the German camps for example, he then said:

Nevertheless, in my plays women have always come out in one way or another as the people I feel something towards which I don’t feel towards men. (94)

He thus admits to his own benevolence towards women and even to favouring them in his writing. For a writer who victimises his women characters and subjects them to domestic violence and brutality in play after play this is a very insightful statement. His

view of women as tough might also explain why they are subjected to torment or struggles of various kinds yet usually prevail and come out victorious.

In an interview with Lawrence M. Bensky in 1966 Pinter stated that curtain lines were very important to him and stressed the importance of writing them properly (57). All of the three plays this essay focuses on, award the male characters the curtain lines and all three plays give them much weight in that final moment of the play. *Night School* ends with Walter's words "That's what it looks like" ambiguously accepting that Sally is gone for good (Pinter 2.221). *The Lover* ends with Richard's unforgettable words "You lovely whore" framing in the idea that Richard is unable to combine and accept his wife as a sexually liberated being (Pinter 2.184). *The Homecoming* ends with Max's pathetic rambling culminating in him asking Ruth to kiss him, leaving no doubt as to who is in complete control and power at the end of that play. The fact that the plays all end with the words of the male characters is further evidence that the battle for power belongs to them, even though they have all seemingly, lost it in the end.

Michael Billington goes as far as to call Pinter a feminist in his analysis of *Night School*, *The Lover* and *The Homecoming* in his biography on Pinter. He claims that *Night School* is more of "a mixture of sexual fantasy and feminist statement" than "Freudian battle" (136-7). Where *The Lover* is concerned, Billington claims Pinter "shows himself to be an instinctive feminist avant la lettre" (143). When it comes to *The Homecoming* Billington says "I see the *Homecoming* as an implicitly feminist play" which is immediately followed by the acknowledgement of other possible interpretations, indicating that this statement is rather provocative which it indeed is, seeing as a feminist reading of Pinter would be considered impossible by many (175). There is something very intriguing about a playwright that can be called both a feminist

and a misogynist by people reading and analysing the exact same play. To claim Pinter a feminist through reading of his 60s plays is valid but a line of interpretation that works best within the limits of that decade. The woman in his previous plays was not as comfortable in her dichotomy, did not possess the sophistication of the woman character in the 60s and did not yield her power as easily. She was both weaker and more of an outcast and the oppressive mother figure was a much more common character.

Although Pinter would develop his woman further and beyond fundamental dichotomy in plays like *Old Times* in the 70s and *A Kind of Alaska* in the 80s which view the woman very sympathetically, he would move into the more political plays like *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language* and *Ashes to Ashes* introducing victimisation and torture on a more general basis than his previous domestic arena.

Sally in *Night School*

Night School was written and broadcasted on television in 1960. Originally written for television, Pinter rewrote it for radio in 1966 which is the published version of this play (Esslin 102). It is usually regarded as one of his least remarkable plays, criticized for being too Pinteresque and thematic, or even reading like a copy of a genuine Pinter play as Pinter himself put it (Esslin 102). In many ways it is a simple story, with an obvious plot and familiar characters explaining Pinter's own rejection of this play and its lack of prestige. However, *Night School* highlights key factors in character formation in subsequent plays.

Sally is a schoolteacher by day and nightclub dancer or prostitute by night. She is the embodiment of the goddess/whore archetype found in Pinter's next plays and which culminate in Ruth in *The Homecoming*. Sally is set up as the perfect lodger; clean, amicable, polite, hardworking and smart. Walter has just been released from prison and is returning to his aunts' home where he used to have a room. Walter's aunts are charmed by their new lodger and enjoy her presence in the house. In fact, her presence does not pose as a threat to anyone but Walter. The fact that a grown man is so threatened by a woman occupying his room in his aunts' house, underlines his immature and childlike nature. We learn that he has lived with his two elderly aunts for a number of years and has never had a girl in his room before. The threat she poses to him concentrates on the space of the room, a recurring symbol of independence and individuality in Pinter's plays. Walter is essentially a failure in both his personal and professional life. His profession is criminal and we are made aware that this is not his first spell in prison so he cannot be very good at what he does.

Sally on the other hand is very good at her profession. This is revealed through her scenes at the nightclub where she is in demand from costumers and full of confidence in her working environment. Both her attitude and vocabulary vary greatly between her working and domestic environment. In her conversations within the home she is polite, with an educated vocabulary which coincides with her profession as school teacher. In her working environment she is coarse, vulgar and determined, careful of the need to hold her ground and defend herself against her more dangerous and shady surroundings, “I’ll kick him in the middle of his paraphernalia one of these days” (Pinter 2.214).

Sally is by no means the first of this type of woman in Pinter’s plays. Since *The Dwarfs*, the average girl turned prostitute has come up with regular intervals throughout Pinter’s work but their characters have slowly but surely been rendered with more sophistication and certain progress of individuality and respectability. In *A Night Out*, written the previous year in 1959, the girl is a rough and delusional tart working street-corners and her dialogue conveys her inner conflict of her role in life, rendering an undignified and even unsympathetic character. Sally on the other hand is full of confidence and dignity and is able to adjust to her environment without compromising her character (Sakellaridou 83). Sally nurtures herself and her wholeness, making no compromise on her personality or profession for the patriarchal society in which she lives. She will, however, be rejected by this society should her night-time profession be revealed and so she must make a decision to either compromise herself or remove herself from the situation. This she does perfectly well, leaving the house (and story) with an amicable note, giving the audience further evidence that Sally’s wholeness as teacher and prostitute and function as such is intact. Her subdivision of character and

the roles she plays are assigned to her by herself, not her social surroundings, and her actions are calculated and fully coherent within this image.

Sally has no assigned role within the home, her long absent hours being remarked upon as a quality in a tenant. She is of no relation to Walter and his family and serves them in no way in their personal lives. Her quick departure in the end and the sense of strength and power that emanates from her may also be a result of her given roles. Unlike Sarah in *The Lover* and Ruth in *The Homecoming*, Sally's socially acceptable role is teacher, a dignified profession outside the home and as a result her attitude of independence and security never seems to falter. Sally's character at first appears to be a rather misogynistic representation of the ever treacherous or deceiving woman, who is sexually promiscuous or opportunist at best. On closer examination, she is actually a statement of woman's choice and empowerment, completely coherent with the atmosphere of the time the play was written. *Night School* however lacks the ambiguity and tension of the later plays. All matters are resolved in the end and the play takes no unforeseeable turns along the way. Simon Trussler claims that it's most interesting feature is that "it looks forward to the sexual themes of Pinter's later plays" (96), and Arnold Hinchliffe argues that *Night School's* faults can be related to the fact that it recycles old themes, such as the room and entanglement of lying whereas the new theme of the female's diverse roles will be further explored in *The Lover* (114).

In comparison to Sally, Walter's actions are childlike, sexually immature and unintelligent. When Sally attempts to appease the tension of their situation regarding their mutual room, Walter fumbles in his attempt to impress Sally by his exaggerated criminal profession and bigamy. In the dialogue between Walter and Sally he seems

increasingly lost and powerless yet at the same time constantly struggling to gain control in their communication and relationship.

WALTER. Think about me last night?

SALLY. You?

WALTER. This offer to share your room, I might consider it.

Pause.

WALTER. I bet you're thinking about me now.

Pause.

SALLY. Why should I be?

WALTER. I'm thinking about you.

Pause. (Pinter 2.211)

Suddenly, his room has become her room and so he submits to her advantage in the situation. Yet at the same time he is trying to find an angle where she can succumb to him and his will. She seems unaffected by his clumsy attempts and as a result, his pursuits become uncomfortable and embarrassing. In the end Walter comes to the conclusion that Sally's night-time personality or alter-ego never existed, using self-denial to make sense of his feelings and harmonise them with her actions. His moral weakness and failure at life is thus the prevailing theme of the play, juxtaposed by the functional and powerful Sally. Sally preserves her complete dichotomy of character by removing herself from surroundings that threaten to overlap her separate entities. With this final act she also becomes a statement of self-respect and personal power belonging only to her.

Night School is a perfect example among Pinter's works in its apparent ethical indifference. Walter is a criminal and only criticized for being not good enough, either

at forgery or escaping the law. His profession provides the comic relief in his aunts' dialogues with Walter but states no moral agenda or invitation to improvement or redemption. Sally is both a nightclub hostess and a very moral and amicable schoolteacher. She has no reason for redemption as such, she is perfectly comfortable in her position, and shows no signs of wanting to change it. The moral questions provoked by the play belong to the communication between the leading characters, Walter and Sally, and the struggle they engage in to overcome one another. Thus, the play deals with the struggle of power, which recurs frequently in Pinter's plays and very often in combination with the sexual politics of the seemingly elusive female.

Night School is unusual among Pinter's plays because it does not leave many questions unanswered. This lack of ambiguity makes it a good example to examine closely yet it also touches on many aspects that are consistent with the plays that follow. The play's female lead character differs from the other two, primarily in her profession, as both Sarah and Ruth are housewives and as such, more in tune with the 60s discussion of the role of the woman. The most defining difference in their character is that Sally does not have an obligation towards her home as she is a temporary lodger and free to come and go as she pleases, whereas Sarah and Ruth are committed to their families and homes and hold, or are assigned, a pivotal role in the household. The struggle for power and possession of independence is therefore fundamentally different in these three characters. Sally's character exemplifies an extreme difference in her dichotomy, characteristic of more politically propagandist works where a message is being deliberately delivered to the audience or reader. In this case the message is essentially a very feminist one where the portrait of Sally conveys a woman of independence, the power of choice and even human rights. Juxtaposed with the

dysfunctional and immature Walter, her portrait is enhanced with strength and harmony. These binary opposites of her character and of their characters also work to enhance the image of the woman as the alien other, rendering a rather unequal world of gender. Her situation however does not deal with the more domestic issues of the second wave of feminism where the role of the housewife and woman's choice became a hot issue.

Sarah in *The Lover*

The Lover was written in 1962 and broadcasted on television the same year. It is one of very few Harold Pinter's plays that is considered upbeat, positive and celebratory of domesticity. Sarah of *The Lover*, is a character situated between Sally of *Night School* and Ruth of *The Homecoming* in Pinter's progression of the split female personality.

Sarah is a typical housewife, lacking a professional career and even any real purpose outside her home but within it she embodies the double role of housewife and mistress. She is able to function perfectly well in her environment through the role-playing games of her marriage. The play opens with a rather amusing dialogue between Richard the husband and Sarah the wife as they casually discuss the arrival of Sarah's lover. After the play builds up momentum for the lover's arrival, the audience is relieved to find out that the lover is in fact the role-playing husband Richard, and the subsequent scenes unravel to some extent the nature of this game within the marriage and the roles each of them assume for the other. As the play explores the married couple's dual relationship as respectable, suburban husband/wife and passionate, lustful mistress/lover the tension of these roles for each character is conveyed to the audience. It then becomes clear that Richard is having trouble with the games they play and the roles they embody and in casual conversation with his wife, he refers to his mistress as a "whore" and "slut" who, according to him, only serves the purpose of igniting his lust (Pinter 2.155). What was primarily playful has now become flammable and dangerous through Richard's use of derogatory words and statements about his relationship with the whore, obviously referring to his role-playing wife. As Richard discusses his extramarital relationship with the whore, his outlook is characterized by lack of both respect and interest for her person and character. He has changed the nature of the

discourse within their home and added tension and strain on their relationship. Sarah fumbles to re-assert herself within this new game of power and tries to adjust Richard's ideas to their previously accepted roles. But where she succeeds, he is unable to accomplish the fusion in his mind of his wife and his lover, feeling the need to separate them still.

Vivien Merchant played Sarah in the original production in 1962 and captured the essence of the 50s housewife in her performance. Her role has a visual element that seems of great importance and the screenplay asserts this with the written directions of how her character adjusts herself in front of the mirror and what type of clothing she is wearing. There is hardly a more entertaining theatrical image of a housewife than Merchant lying on her couch, reading a magazine in high-heeled shoes, waiting for her lover of the afternoon. The character of Sarah is in fact the embodiment of this classic female image, which at the time this play was written was under extreme scrutiny and would subsequently be torn down by the feminist movement in an attempt to harmonize the woman within and outside the home. A year after *The Lover* premiered, Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* was published. It dealt with the broken ideology of the domestic housewife and the disappointment and lack of fulfilment the stereotypical housewife experienced. Friedan's book became a best-seller and the reaction to the publication was felt worldwide, indicating that the timing of this book was part of a larger progression of social change, later to be coined as the second wave of feminism ("women's movement").

In the context of the socio-political landscape of the time, Sarah embodies a rather feminist approach to the character of the housewife. She may be a housewife and she may even be bored, but she is no victim of her surroundings and is fully capable of

adjusting her situation to fit her needs. Where Richard lacks the resources to embrace their situation, she is capable of achieving harmony. The plot thus seems socio-political in this domestic setting. The play takes place exclusively in the married suburban couple's home and deals with topics belonging only to the home and their marriage. Through this topic of married life, Pinter is able to explore the mindset of each gender and their ability, or lack thereof, to function with the other. What makes *The Lover* stand out from other Pinter plays is the spirit by which it embraces the playfulness and willingness of the married suburban couple to engage in an erotic fantasy with each other. The idea of the dullness of married life is attacked with astonishing vitality as these stereotypical characters show inventiveness and skill in spontaneity and erotic seduction. Their eroticism is celebrated within their domestic setting and the fear of betrayal within this most sacred of contracts is faced and ridiculed in a new setting and situation. Their sexual and even adulterous nature is made joyful and even natural, and the narration lacks the usual threat of unavoidable doom or menacing undertone.

Richard stirs up the assigned roles within the home as he starts questioning his wife about her lover and her attitude towards the lover. He also asks of her mindset towards himself whilst she receives her lover and if he, her husband, enters her mind at all during those afternoons. She is surprised and clearly uncomfortable by his questioning as this seems unusual and never before brought up, but embraces the chance to question Richard about his mistress whom he refers to as whore. In his description of the whore Richard exposes the split in his approach to his wife on one hand, and the whore on the other:

RICHARD. Why? I wasn't looking for your double, was I? I wasn't
looking for a woman I could respect, as you, whom I could admire

and love, as I do you. Was I? All I wanted was . . . how shall I put it . . . someone who could express and engender lust with all lust's cunning. Nothing more. (Pinter 2.157)

Sarah tries to understand his approach to his affair as she listens to him talk of her role as whore in his life with complete disregard of her person and at the same time, hail her characteristics in her role as his wife. His need for a split between the two halves becomes increasingly obvious as he discusses how they each serve him in completely different ways. The couple then assert their lack of jealousy towards the other's affair, emphasising that all is as it should be, and that their role-playing games will go on intact. Richard's explanations of how the two women roles serve him in different ways also echoes the chauvinistic viewpoint that the woman's role in life is to serve the man, even if she does it through multiple roles. Sarah however describes her husband and lover as respectable, loving men and approaches them both with the same attitude of loving kindness. Richard, as the lover Max, again starts to raise questions on the arrangement of the couple, asking both about the husband's attitude towards the lovers, and complains he is no longer interested in continuing with the affair. He even goes as far as to complain of Sarah's figure no longer pleasing him and that he prefers women with a fuller figure. On his return home as the husband Richard he denies being unsatisfied with his whore's body and states that he enjoys thin women. At this point in the play he claims he can no longer live with Sarah's adulterous behaviour and demands that the affair either stops or takes place outside the home. He keeps his wife and his whore completely separate at all times and as a result has a difficulty harmonizing them in Sarah. Sarah keeps the personality of her lover and husband separated in her

dialogues with them yet her attitude towards them is the same and her personality seems whole. She is obviously content with the situation and desperate to keep it intact.

Sarah is faltered by Richard's behaviour when he attacks their assigned roles and attempts to destruct them, but she prevails in the end. She is more involved in her relationships than Sally but not as complete and strong as Ruth in her struggle for power. Richard's curtain line, "You lovely whore" assigns the role of the whore on Sarah who is not in complete control of her assigned roles and therefore not complete in her dichotomy. Sarah's roles are each defined by the nature of her relationship to the man and both work to serve him. Where Richard enjoys the double identity of his split character, Sarah remains Sarah, indicating that the role-playing was initially intended to suit his needs. Thus, Sarah functions in harmony with herself and her different aspects of character whereas Richard needs to separate them in order to celebrate each role in their relationship.

The dialogue in *The Lover* is expressive of the routine of long-term relationships, both in the married relationship and the afternoon lovers. Both relationships have been going on for years, the marriage having lasted ten years already. The audience is never made aware who initiated this agreement of role-play within the marriage but they seem to disagree on the issue, each claiming that the other looked elsewhere first. *The Lover* becomes an allegory of the issues faced by gender politics in the 60s. Although this most certainly was not Pinter's intention, the fact remains that the issues that the play deals with are undeniably those pertaining to sexual politics and perfectly in line with the socio-political landscape of its time. The curtain line awards it the brilliant open ended ambiguity so typical of Harold Pinter, leaving the audience with the feeling that these issues have not been resolved, and the anticipation that gender

politics are worthwhile and even entertaining subjects to explore in the medium of theatre.

Ruth in *The Homecoming*

The Homecoming was written in 1964 and is still regarded as one of Pinter's finest plays. In the previously mentioned interview with Bensky, Pinter claimed that of all his plays up to that time, *The Homecoming* satisfied him most in terms of structural entity (57). *The Homecoming* had only been written the previous year when the interview took place but it was the play which he was most willing to discuss in terms of meaning and structure throughout his career. The play marks the peak of the dual character portrayal of women in Pinter's plays as Ruth is rendered with confidence and accuracy in a shocking narration that never loses its focus. The whore and the multifaceted woman would still occur in Pinter's later plays but never again with such emphasize on character and her social surroundings. Ruth shares Sally's and Sarah's characteristics of confidence, femininity and harmony but differs from them in her strength, attitude and independence towards the male characters and their surroundings.

The homecoming of the play belongs to Teddy, who returns home from America for a visit to his all male family with his wife Ruth. The men's relationship with one another is established through their interaction at the beginning of the play and new characters are introduced steadily with the dialogue giving the audience the information of their relation to one another and the nature of their usual communication with each other. The lack of the mother is asserted through comments on her passing away and a fragmented history of the family's story is told through the characters' conversations. Something seems wrong from the very start and their use of words and tone suggest a menacing dialogue with embellished messages of ill content. In an interview with Miriam Gross in 1980, Pinter claimed that despite evidence to the contrary, love could be found in his plays and taking *The Homecoming* as an example

stated “I think there’s a great deal of love in that play but they simply don’t know what to do with it.” referring to the violence exerted by the all-male family (74).

Once Teddy and Ruth arrive in the house, it is clear that she will become the main focus of the male characters, and their pursuit of power, which was already in play, becomes enhanced to a much greater degree. Now the power-play is focused on the sole female as the men try to assert their authority over her in various ways. Surprisingly, Ruth enters this pursuit with her own character and personal values at stake. Individual confrontations with each of the male characters ensue and the battle for power is fought through action and dialogue. The scene introducing Teddy and Ruth into the story conveys a married couple’s mundane power struggle as they order each other around, each claiming they know what is best for the other. Ruth wins the battle as she leaves the house for a “breath of air” leaving the more insecure Teddy behind (Pinter 3.31). Symbolically, she takes the key to the house with her.

Teddy at first acts as the typical domesticated male character of the 50s, expressing concern for his wife’s wellbeing, and showing tactical moves in his attempts to control her. At the end of the play he represents a husband more in line with what men of the 60s could identify with when he is forced to grant her complete autonomy in her affairs. One of the most memorable lines in the play belong to Teddy, when talking about the living room and how they had knocked down a wall between the room and the hallway, he says “The structure wasn’t effected, you see. My mother was dead.” implying that his mother’s death had left a comparable hole in the family’s structure (Pinter 3.29). This vacancy thus needs to be filled and Ruth is tried and tested by the family members in an effort to fill the empty role of the mother figure. But Max and

Sam's dialogue suggests that the deceased mother was not only a mother figure but also a working prostitute.

Ruth's father-in-law Max shows the widest range of emotion in his reaction towards her. Upon first meeting Ruth, he shows extreme aggression, using derogative words that compose one of the most shocking dialogues of this notoriously shocking play. In the 1966 interview with Bensky, Pinter mentions the importance of using obscene words sparingly and to avoid putting them on for show as to not diminish their power and wonder just to demonstrate freedom of speech (63-4). This statement adds weight to the importance of Max's seemingly unnecessary aggression as he proceeds to call Ruth a "stinking pox-ridden slut" and "filthy scrubber" and claims he has "never had a whore under this roof before" (Pinter 3.49-50). In the next act, Max hails Ruth as 'a charming woman' (Pinter 3.57), and "intelligent and sympathetic" (Pinter 3.59), his attitude toward her completely renewed in a matter of minutes. These extremes in expression and quick turns in attitude are very in tune with Max's character. He repeatedly blurts out inappropriate statements towards the rest of the family, including his deceased wife whom he both hails as a wonderful mother and describes as having had a "rotten stinking face" (Pinter 3.17). Max represents the lost man, whose stature and role within the home have been upset. He struggles to retain his authority as head of the household yet simultaneously reminds the audience of a time of different values.

His youngest son Joey is just the opposite. As the youngest in the family his childlike nature and immaturity recalls that of Walter in *Night School*. He is easily dealt with by his sister-in-law who engages in sexual activity with him which results in his humiliation, stripping him of his masculinity and asserting his role as the child of the family. He expresses longing for her in the most childlike manner, ending with him

kneeling at her feet in the final scene, completely succumbed to her sexuality and power.

Ruth's scenes with her brother-in-law Lenny are the ones most descriptive of her character and the contrast of the sexes. Where she is playful, relaxed and powerful, Lenny is fumbling, struggling and at times silly. She orders him about much like Walter had ordered Sally about in *Night School* and their first dialogue in the living room recalls that of the earlier play. The fundamental difference is that Ruth engages in Lenny's attacks and returns his verbal assaults and successfully throws him off with a memorable line; "If you take the glass . . . I'll take you" (Pinter 3.42). She seems to thoroughly enjoy herself whilst engaging in this battle and despite Lenny's menacing approach, Ruth shows no signs of being threatened or weakened by his attacks. She goes on to call him Leonard, provoking him to adhere to her motherly status, which he inadvertently asserts by becoming aggravated and juvenile. Lenny is composed of stereotypical male characteristics. He is a powerful, logical, street-wise pimp, an alpha male who holds his ground against all the other male characters. He poses as the antagonist of the narration, in fact the real threat to Ruth the protagonist stems from him, and he appropriately masterminds the plot to profit from prostituting her. Ruth's victory over Lenny is complete when she negotiates her own terms into their contract but postpones confirming it until a more suitable time. A time more suitable to herself, asserting that the choice is hers, very in tune with demands from the 60s feminist movement.

If Ruth exemplifies the ultimate whore/goddess, the male characters in *The Homecoming* take on the ultimate fight of the men to conquer the woman. The interesting fact is that they lose despite the actual storyline suggesting otherwise. Ruth,

although being left behind with her in-laws for what appears to be sexual slavery, is anything but a victim. After four pages of discussions and completely unemotional negotiations, she finally accepts the role they offer her and becomes their live-in whore/goddess. The final words of the play belong to Max who in his upset monologue conveys a foreshadowing of a future more favourable to Ruth.

MAX. I don't think she's got it clear.

Pause.

MAX. You understand what I mean? Listen, I've got a funny idea she'll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She'll use us, make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it! You want to bet?

Pause

MAX. She won't . . . be adaptable! (Pinter 3.89)

Ruth is a complete and whole character and with her, Pinter's dual female character had peaked. It is in Ruth that Pinter succeeds to perfect his vision of the whore/goddess and the final scene of *The Homecoming* underlines her stature; Ruth sitting benevolent and calm in an armchair with Joey kneeling at her feet, Lenny standing next to her and the two older male characters kneeling or lying on the floor. The image recalls that of an altarpiece, with Ruth representing Mary, the Holy Mother and the female goddess. The characters' physical appearance at the end of the play should leave no doubt as to Ruth yielding power over all the men present. The only ambivalent posture is that of Lenny who "stands watching" which could be interpreted as his present hold on the situation (Pinter 3.90). In his reaction to a 1994 Paris production where Lenny was seen placing his hand on Ruth's shoulder in the final

scene, Pinter claimed that this was an incorrect interpretation, saying “[...] Lenny does not have any power over her” (Billington 175).

There is a further religious subtext in *The Homecoming* when the symbolism of Ruth’s sacrifice is examined. She sacrifices her own family, her husband and sons, to provide for her all male in-laws financially, physically and mentally. If Ruth’s sacrifice seems absurd and unbelievable, the religious context seems all the more political. Ruth is a biblical name, from the Old Testament whose character was one who embodied the ultimate female values of loyalty and devotion. After the death of her husband, the biblical Ruth followed her mother-in-law Naomi to Egypt, giving herself completely to Naomi. The sacrificial nature of the message to women, embedded in this biblical story, becomes extremely provocative during a time when the idolization of women’s domestic values and the sacrifice many of them made to adhere to these values was being torn down by the women’s movement. Additionally, Friedan argued in *The Feminine Mystique* that the idolization of the domestic role of women had paralyzed them, a critique very often directed at religion (28).

Conclusion

An interesting aspect of the exploration of the whore archetype in *Night School*, *The Lover* and *The Homecoming* is Pinter's own view on them. He reportedly disliked the oldest of these plays, *Night School* to the point that he refused to authorise further performances of it and six years after writing it for television, re-wrote it for radio (Esslin 102). Whereas he seemed most content with the youngest of these three, *The Homecoming*, the play that ultimately celebrates the duality of his female character to the point of idolisation and worship. *The Homecoming* is also the play that Pinter has been most willing to discuss in terms of character build up, structure and meaning.

Sally, Sarah and Ruth have numerous common features that collectively enhance their characters and attribute them a powerful reading of meaning. Sally embodies the roles of whore and teacher, Sarah the whore and housewife and Ruth the whore and goddess. Their most obvious common feature is that of the whore, compliant with Sakellaridou's notion that this linearity of character "results in the axiom that all women are whores" (86). The whore is undeniably their most prevailing character and constantly asserted as such by their male counterparts. This pursuit of the whore through these plays results in what seems to be a linear process of perfecting and harmonising the working woman with the domestic mother, compliant with the rise in social feminism of the time. In her revolutionary book *Sexual Politics* (1970) Kate Millett made the following statement:

One of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron, and in the present between career woman and housewife.

Although this comment originally belonged to the context of theory of sexual politics it works as commentary on the three plays in this essay since it suggests that Pinter chose a pre-existing setting of patriarchal power struggle to play out his gender wars and reconstruct the woman.

Where the three women differ is in their collision with the men. Sally makes an attempt to appease her conflict with Walter when she suggests that they share the room but no actual fight for power is resolved as she simply walks away from the situation. Sarah is more engaged in her relationship to Richard and is obliged to enter the power struggle with more at stake than Sally would ever have been. Although Sarah succeeds in restoring harmony in her relationship, her pursuit is entered on Richard's terms and to appease his values and harmony. Finally, Ruth enters what feels like a domestic war, with not one, but five men. Although the aggression initially stems from the men, she takes on the fight on her own terms, conquering them to arrive in a position of full power.

Mark Batty claims that part of the striking effect that *The Homecoming* has on its audience stems from the challenge they face with their own attitudes and the moral and ethical questions that arise within the viewer (46). His argument can just as well be applied to *Night School* and *The Lover*. The provocative ethics of all three plays provide an arena for the audience to come to their own conclusions on issues of gender, feminism and family. In line with the contemporary social landscape of the 60s, and Harold Pinter's own personal issues of the time, the pursuit of the new woman image and the conflicts of gender within the home and family shines through all three plays. The resulting statement is that women possess individual strength and the ability to achieve equilibrium in their diversity, whilst facing adversity. Above and beyond social

or sexual politics, Harold Pinter was an artist and his plays are works of art, brought on by a need to create, not mediate meaning. That part is left to the reader. At the same time we can safely assume that as an artist he was influenced by his contemporary discourse on issues that ended up in his plays and during the 60s, Pinter contemplated the power struggle of gender in domesticity through his benevolent approach to the whore.

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