



A FREUDIAN READING OF HAROLD PINTER'S *THE HOMECOMING*

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Abstract:

Like many other literary genres, drama reflects human experiences and explores their psychological depths. It brings life to text and meaning to gesture. It breaks down all obstacles between the work and its audience. Drama is the most authentic representation of literature since it incorporates performance into text and embodies meaning on stage. This paper aimed to psychoanalyse Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* according to Sigmund Freud's theories, particularly self-defence mechanisms, oedipal complex, sibling rivalry, and the concept of a dysfunctional family. The approach used in this study is qualitative, in which description and analysis are provided. The discussion showed that *The Homecoming* reflects human nature in its extreme state in which "what should not be" outgrows "what should be". It is a play of contradiction, violation, and menace. However, it is recommended to analyse *The Homecoming* in future papers using feminist theory as the play challenges established norms of femininity and imposes aspects of patriarchy.

Keywords: Theatre of Menace, psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming*

1. Introduction

The first who coined the term "*comedy of menace*" was the critic Irving Wardle in one of his reviews in 1958 for *Encore* magazine, and since then, the term has been widely used by critics. Comedies of menace and comedies of manners have been employed interchangeably in the field of theatre and literary criticism, and Harold Pinter is one of the playwrights well-known for such a genre as his "*drama provokes laughter through balanced phraseology, antithesis, and the language and manners of social classes*" (Jorge González. 2022, p. 3)

The Homecoming is a play composed of two acts written by Harold Pinter in 1964. It is considered one of the playwright's most disturbing pieces of writing. To summarise the play, when Teddy returns home from the United States with his young wife, Ruth, she will meet the

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rest of the family in London for the first time. Among those Teddy introduces her to are his dad Max (a retired butcher), Max's brother Sam (a driver), and two of his brothers, Joey (a boxer), and Lenny (a pimp). Power is essential to the drama, as it is in most of Pinter's writing. Ruth serves as the spark for what is effectively a protracted power struggle amongst the male members of the family.

Teddy and Ruth have been married for six years and are the parents of three children. Lenny is a sexually charged character with whom her first interaction is purely sexual. Because Lenny did not inform his father about the arrival of his brother and his wife, Max gets angry when he first meets Ruth.

In the play's second act, Joey and Ruth kiss and hug one another on the sofa. Finally, Max determines that they should keep her, after which they explore the possibility of putting her to work as a prostitute. Teddy tells her about the proposal made by the family. Ruth begins to negotiate her conditions with him after he offers her the option of staying or leaving. Ruth sits with Joey's head in her lap, with Lenny watching from the other side. In the play's final line, Max says, "*Kiss me.*" the play explores themes such as dysfunctional family, masculinity, and sexuality.

2. Methodology

Harold Pinter's play, *The Homecoming*, will be analysed using Sigmund Freud's classical psychoanalysis, whose concepts have played a pivotal role in interpreting people's experiences and behaviours. Such concepts as the unconscious, self-defence mechanisms, the Oedipus complex, and sibling rivalry will be exclusively used in the present study. Freud divided the human mind into three parts: conscious, subconscious, and unconscious. The latter is where painful experiences and feelings, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts are repressed and manifest in dreams or in what Freud called defence mechanisms. Amongst these defences, I can mention the following: projection, regression, denial, displacement, selective memory, and selective memory. These are strategies to interact with the external world and release the tension between our past and present.

Projection is the act of taking one's unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or impulses and ascribing them to someone else. It is a defence mechanism whereby one person attributes their faults to another. Regression is the reversion to an earlier developmental stage of behaviour as a result of stress or loss. It is sometimes considered an immature form of defence mechanism that adults can use. Displacement happens when anxiety-producing or traumatic emotions are transferred to a less threatening object or situation. The individual transfers emotional energy to something less significant, but psychologically the intense emotions can be vented or dissipated. Displacement can be either conscious or unconscious. For example, a person may consciously decide that rather than acknowledge their feelings about a situation they will redirect them to someone else. Denial is the defence mechanism of completely ignoring threatening information and refusing to contemplate it mentally. The term also describes evading responsibility for action by asserting that it never occurred. Selective memory is when a person remembers only positive or happy memories of a person, place or situation, forgetting the negative ones. This can be conscious or unconscious.

The Oedipus complex was first stated in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, first published in 1899, where he explained that all children between the ages of three and five experience a sexual desire for their opposite-sex parent and hostility toward the same-sex parent. Freud elaborates that this complex results from the wishes and fears of children who are not yet mature enough to understand such desires and fears. Freud claims that these children usually feel disturbed about such an intense desire for the parent, especially when they see their father's or mother's sexual desire for someone else. Such a feeling is accompanied by an intense hatred toward the other parent, who feels deeply hurt by this jealousy. Thus, the child unconsciously attempts to rid themselves of this tension by projecting their desires onto the parent, who then unconsciously adopts them. For example, a girl would resent her father for caressing her mother and then begin to desire him. A boy would resent his mother for being preferred by his father and then repress his desire for her. The child's need to denounce the offending parent's desires leads them to unconsciously adopt other parents' roles and reject their impulses or wishes to be loved by that parent (Freud, 1997).

3. Discussion

In Act One, the play opens with a description of Lenny, providing metaphorical symbols of homosexual orientation: marking the back of a newspaper with a pencil that carries phallic connotations. His father, Max, is given some motherly quality as he repeatedly comes from the kitchen to a drawer, as mothers usually do in their daily household tasks. He even reads newspapers in the kitchen, which seems to be his familiar place, where he spends most of his time, as many mothers are accustomed to.

However, Max intends to affirm his masculinity by carrying a stick that again presents a phallic symbol. Max plays a double role, one as a father and the other as a mother. Since the death of his wife, Jessie, and coincidentally being retired, Max has found himself fully taking care of his three children and brother. Like his name, "Max," suggests, he has done his best (i.e., to the max) as both a father and a mother.

This heavy responsibility that Max carries out has affected his psyche and makes him an easily irritated character. It has also influenced the general family atmosphere and created tempered and tense interactions amongst the members. For example, from the very beginning of the play, the way Max and his son Lenny communicate reveals a sense of a cold and conflicting relationship, the type of which should not be between father and son:

Max: *"What have you done with the scissors? [...] Did you hear me? [...] Do you hear what I'm saying? I'm talking to you! Where's the scissors?"*

Lenny (looking up, quietly): *"Why don't you shut up, you daft."*

Max lifts his stick and points it at him.

Max: *"Don't you talk to me like that? I'm warning you."*

Lenny: *"Plug it, will you, you stupid sod, I'm trying to read the paper."*

Max: *"Listen! I'll chop your spine off, you talk to me like that!"* (Pinter, p. 7-9)

Max seems aggressive and rude as he threatens his son with the stick, and Lenny is cheeky and disobedient in the way he ignores his father's questions and insults him. They are certainly members of a dysfunctional family and psychologically unhealthy. Furthermore, the repeated pauses and ellipses in the text imply a sense of miscommunication or a communication block. Family members' psychological health and well-being will be highly influenced by how the family functions. Problem-solving, communication, roles, adaptation, intimacy, and behavioural control are characteristics of family functioning. A family is said to be dysfunctional if interaction within the unit does not work properly (Utaminingsyas, Shanti, Prastuti, & Harsono, 2022).

The play is full of sexual connotations as if Pinter had studied psychology and intended to load his work with such messages as a strategy to irritate the audience and provoke their feelings. For instance, one symbol is the cigarette, which according to Freud (2010) serves "*as a symbol of the penis*" (p.181). This phallic symbol is repeated five times in different words (*fag, fag, cigarette, cigarette, it*) in one single short passage to draw the audience's attention to its importance in the context:

*"I think I'll have a **fag**. Give me a **fag**."*

Pause.

*"I just asked you to give me a **cigarette**."*

Pause.

"Look what I'm lumbered with.

*He takes a crumpled **cigarette** from his pocket.*

I'm getting old, my word of honour.

*He lights **it**." (Pinter, p. 7)*

Once more, Max smokes, and this time, big cigars, along with his brother Sam, who brought with him a box of them, as many as they should satisfy their feelings of masculinity:

*Sam: [...] "He gave me a box of **cigars**."*

*Sam shows Max the **cigars**. Max takes one from the box, pinches it and sniffs it.*

*"It's a fair **cigar**."*

Sam: "Want to try one?"

*Max and Sam light **cigars**. (Pinter, p. 12)*

In addition to the symbolic sexual connotations of the stick, cigarettes, and cigars, Max reinforces his sense of masculinity that signifies domination and power, which he longs to maintain over his family members, with memories and souvenirs. Whether this is true or not, he relies now on his past experiences and, for instance, mentions his huge fellow MacGregor. Although he is over sixty years old, Max has a fake image of himself as being still strong and unbeatable and that the scars he carries reveal his victories:

"I'm still strong [...] I used to knock about with a man called MacGregor [...] We were two of the worst hated men in the West End of London [...] I still got the scars. [...] he was a big man, he was over six foot tall." (Pinter, p. 8)

Max refers to his old friend MacGregor, if he was really a friend and not a client of his wife, and mentions that he was fascinated by Jessie. I wonder how a man who claims masculinity accepts others, whoever they are, to molest his wife. This is one of the techniques Pinter used to annoy and irritate his audience and shock their feelings: he presented the socially unacceptable, i.e., the taboos. A wife is often associated with one's dignity. However, Max may resist his repressed guilty and painful experience of being a pimp for his wife by using two defence mechanisms Freud called denial and selective memory. In other words, Max unconsciously denies that he used to be a pimp, and thus does not remember anything related to that experience.

Let us imagine what would go on in the spectacles' minds when they come across such a scene and experience such a feeling. Most of them certainly get involved in the situation and imaginatively play the role themselves and explore their reactions. Not only are males, amongst the audience, expected to reject the idea, but they also hate it because it hurts their masculinity and dignity. Females, attending the play, also get irritated as they feel threatened and insecure. Sex is blindly dominating the scene and becoming a mad drive.

When Sam comes in, he starts showing off being praised by a VIP customer as a professional driver. Moreover, he recalls memories of his military service during World War II that he has in fact never done:

"He told me I was the best chauffeur he'd ever had. The best one. I told him I fought in the second."
(Pinter, p. 13-14)

However, this impressive image in which Sam depicts himself risks Max's position in the family and creates an atmosphere of competition for power. As a result, Max tries to castrate Sam in order to delimit his capacities and weaken his domination because he feels a sense of castration anxiety and a fear of demotion to the powerless position in the family. According to Freud, castration anxiety might affect people at different levels of their lives far beyond the psychological sphere. It might also develop into a serious fear of death and from "*potential disfigurement to life-threatening situations*" (Fahmy, 2022, p. 18). Max mocks Sam for being too late to get married:

Max: *"It's funny you never got married, isn't it? A man with all your gifts.*

Isn't it? A man like you?"

Sam: *"There's still time."*

Max: *"Is there?"* (Pinter, p. 14)

Moreover, Max intends to emasculate his brother Sam when he makes a proposal that he bring his future wife to their home to be shared and please them in turn:

Max: *"When you find the right girl, Sam [...] bring her to live here, she can keep us all happy. We'd take it in turns to give her a walk round the park."* (Pinter, p. 15)

As a matter of fact, Sam begins a counterattack on Max. He takes an apple and starts eating it before him while talking about his "charming" wife Jessie, and that carries a sexual symbolism through the lens of Freud's interpretation (*The Symbols*, 2014).

The play takes a big turn when Teddy and his sexy wife, Ruth, visit his family. From the very beginning, Ruth's short answers to Teddy imply a fragile relationship that lacks mutual love and maybe respect. I think that respect between partners, wife and husband, is far more important than anything else in their relationship. Love, for example, can grow as tiny seeds and become wonderful fruitful trees if cared for, but respect will never recover if it is lost exactly as broken pieces of glass never be restored. Accordingly, the dynamics of the family are negatively affected by the family's conflicting atmosphere, primarily created by parents, which brings about and produces unhealthy individuals, as we shall see in the next few paragraphs.

Lenny is the first family member who meets Ruth and dares to tickle her body. Although she tells him twice that she is married to his brother Teddy, he deliberately ignores that and keeps conversing with her. The way he behaves with her probably reflects how he thinks about women. He internalised that passive image of women since childhood, when his mother, Jessie, gave him the worst example. She was a prostitute that belonged to all men and was never sufficiently available to him. That was immensely shocking to a child and embarrassingly went against his instinctive sense of possession.

Lenny tells Ruth a strange story in which he claims he killed a rich woman in love with him simply because that was against his will. The story seems to be no more than a projection of his own repressed past feelings of being rejected by women. It is a defence mechanism employed to project one's guilty desire or fear onto another person and condemn them for it, as a strategy of denying that problem. I think that it was difficult for Lenny to develop stable intimate relationships in the early or late stages of his adulthood because he might not be attractive to girls or his sexual orientation did not support that. All possibilities are open to discussion because the play provides no details. Lenny may suffer from a problem rooted in sexuality.

It is important here to refer to Freud's concept of sexuality, as he believed that it is inescapable and represents an important part of identity that infants develop through three main stages: oral, anal, and genital. He also coined the terms "Eros" and "Thanatos". Both Sam's and Lenny's behaviours imply a fear of intimacy and a fear of abandonment subsequently. For example, Sam seems to avoid sexual encounters with females and thus never gets married or engaged in a relationship because, he thinks, being too close to a woman may cause him emotional trauma. Similarly, Lenny appears to be interested in frequent sexual intercourse with different partners because he thinks having various sexual partners may keep him safe from being abandoned, and thus from being psychologically hurt.

Lenny continues telling Ruth stories, and this time about volunteering in snow-clearing for the Borough Council. He uses phallic symbols such as shovels and fags. He wants to draw her attention to his masculinity and exert a sense of domination over women. Lenny is psychologically abnormal. Ruth plays the role of a prostitute when she starts seducing him through her sexual speech and manners. She is psychologically unhealthy, too. They are seducing one another in, I think, a silly and overt way.

Lenny: *"I'll take it, then."*

Ruth: *"If you take the glass ●●● I'll take you."* (Pinter, p. 33).

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?"*

She laughs shortly, drains the glass (Pinter, p. 34).

Supposedly, both Lenny and Ruth are products of dysfunctional families for which their parents are exclusively responsible. The type of relationship between Lenny and his father, Max, is a clear symptom of a severe psychological disorder. According to Freud, the father's role in the process of children's psychological and educational development is minimised to that of the punisher and commander. Dysfunctional families lie behind their members' psychological disorders and emotional traumas (Traetta & Doronzo, 2022, p. 159). One of these disorders is the Oedipus complex, the conflicting relationship with the parent of the opposite sex that one may experience during adulthood and keep repressed in his unconscious. Such an unresolved conflict will affect their future behaviour. For instance, the following conversation between Lenny and his dad, Max, again reflects signs of oedipal fixation and a dysfunctional family. Lenny asks a question, and Max replies by spitting at him:

Lenny: *"[...] I'll ask you a question [...] that night*

• [...] you got me . . . that night with Mum, what was it like?"

Pause.

Max: *"You'll drown in your own blood."*

Lenny: *"If you prefer to answer the question in writing I've got no objection."*

Max spits at him.

Lenny looks down at the carpet.

"Now look what you've done. I'll have to Hoover that in the morning, you know." (Pinter, p. 37)

The carpet Lenny cares about a lot symbolises a motherly connection. It is exactly what happened with Ruth when she poured water on it and he got angry and annoyed. A man, in particular, is looking for someone or something associated with the image of his mother that has been fixed in his mind since early childhood. A child's relationship with his parents is very important in shaping his future sexual orientation. Possible parental problems will have the biggest impact on his adult sexual life. It is never possible for someone to be jealous of their partner without having previous psychological conflicts mainly rooted in disturbing childhood relationships with one or both parents. If their parents frequently quarrel with each other, or if

their marriage is not happy, the ground will be set for their children to have the most severe predisposition to sexual and mental problems (Freud, 1957, p.228).

Another psychological struggle can be deduced from the next dialogue between Max and his brother Sam. They reflect what Freud called sibling rivalry. The latter is the sibling competition for one or both parents' attention, love, and affection. If such psychological conflicts are not resolved, they will affect children's future lives, as is exactly happening with Max and his brother. Sam seems to have repressed deep in his unconscious the painful feelings of jealousy and hatred towards his sibling Max, the preferred son by their father:

Max to Sam: *"I want you to get rid of these feelings of resentment you've got towards me. I wish I could understand them. When Dad died he said to me, Max, look after your brothers. That's exactly what he said to me."*

Max to Joey: *"He's even prepared to spit on the memory of our Dad. What kind of a son were you, you wet wick? I gave birth to three grown men! All on my own bat. What have you done?"* (Pinter, p. 39-40).

When Max first meets Ruth, he calls her: dirty tarts, a stinking pox-ridden slut, a whore, a bitch, a filthy scrubber, a disease, a smelly scrubber, a bedpan, and a slop bucket. He rains on Teddy's parade and spoils his visit. As for his son Lenny, a woman for Max carries a passive connotation as she is regarded as a mere source of sexual desire and a tool for pleasure. According to Freudian psychology, Max is projecting his repressed guilty desire and experience of being a pimp and his wife being a prostitute onto Ruth as he insults her and expresses his disgust at their first meeting. It can also be interpreted as displacement because Max could not react angrily in front of Jessie's stronger and wealthier clients, so he displaces that anger onto Ruth, the weaker and less threatening figure.

Max: *"Who asked you to bring dirty tarts into this house?"*

Teddy: *"Listen, don't be silly--"*

[...]

Max: *"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, p. 41).

[...]

Max: *"I haven't seen the bitch for six years, he comes home without a word, he brings a filthy scrubber off the street, he shacks up in my house!"*

Max: *"I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died. [...] they bring the slop bucket with them. They bring the bedpan with them. (To Teddy.) Take that disease away from me. Get her away from me."*

Max: *"You a mother?"*

Ruth: *"Yes."*

Max: *"How many you got?"*

Ruth: *"Three."*

He turns to Teddy: *"Max. All yours, Ted?"* (Pinter, p. 44).

Act Two opens with all the male characters except Joey lighting cigars, which again stand for their animalistic desire for sex. They perform as if they were starving predators pouncing at prey. This scene explores the dark side of ourselves that we need to challenge through the strength of our minds and reasoning. It is a hard task to overcome our desires, and no one can claim the contrary and refute this reality. However, the more we are educated, the more we become aware of how to control our instinctive drives.

I think he wondered whether you would be pleased with me.

Max: *"But you're a charming woman."*

Ruth: *"I was."* (Pinter, p. 49-50)

Ruth: *"No ... I was a model for the body. A photographic model for the body."*

Lenny: *"Indoor work?"*

Ruth: *"That was before I had ... all my children."* (Pinter, p. 57).

Ruth stands. They dance, slowly.

Teddy stands, with Ruth's coat.

Max and Joey come in from door and into the room.

They stand.

Lenny kisses Ruth. They stand, kissing.

Joey: *"Christ, she's wide open. Dad, look at that."*

Pause.

"She's a tart" (Pinter, p. 58).

Joey goes to them. He takes Ruth's arm. He smiles at Lenny. He sits with Ruth on the sofa, embraces and kisses her.

He looks up at Lenny (Pinter, p. 59).

He leans her back until she lies beneath him. He kisses her. He looks up at Teddy and Max.

It's better than a rubdown, this.

Lenny sits on the arm of the sofa. He caresses Ruth's hair as Joey embraces her. (Pinter, p. 59)

Max: *"Where's the whore? Still in bed? She'll make us all animals."*

Lenny: *"The girl's a tease."*

Max: *"What?"*

Lenny: *"She's had Joey on a string."*

Max: *"What do you mean?"*

Teddy: *"He had her up there for two hours and he didn't go the whole hog."* (Pinter, p.68)

Finally, the family members discuss a proposal for Ruth. They want her to stay in their home because they need a woman amongst them. They miss the mother, the wife, and the prostitute, exactly the same roles Ruth has been playing since her arrival.

Max turns to the others.

"You know something? Perhaps it's not a bad idea to have a woman in the house. Perhaps it's a good thing. Who knows? Maybe we should keep her." (Pinter, p. 69)

In *The Homecoming*, the family members and the audience represent a person's personality, as they symbolise, according to Freud, its three parts: id, superego, and ego. We all have instinctual desires, most of which we were born with and developed through time, which are sometimes irresistible for some. That is simply the id. However, we cannot sometimes meet the needs of our desires because they are against our principles and challenge the morals we have internalised over time as they were dictated by the family or society, we grew up in. That is the superego. An expected conflict between the unsatisfied desires and the set of principles hindering the process of satisfaction takes place, and here a referee-like part of our mind intervenes to mediate and lessen the tension, that is the ego. This is a rough explanation of some parts of Freud's personality theory.

In the play, Max, Sam, Lenny, and Joey stand for the id with their animalistic sexual and incestuous desires, i.e., libido. They are blindly interested in sex, and it does not matter how they get it. They dare to have sex, in the case of Lenny and Joey, with their sister-in-law Ruth, who does not in turn object.

The audience represents the superego as they maintain their shared culture that dictates the code for proper sexual conduct according to which sexual destructive and nondestructive behaviours are determined. The American audience of that time certainly reacted against the behaviours performed on stage during the play which they considered morally wrong and socially unacceptable, such as prostitution, molestation, and incest.

Teddy, in turn, represents the third element of personality, the ego, which plays the role of referee or mediator between the id and superego, between the instinctive desires and social taboos. His PhD symbolises rationale and critical thinking. Teddy allows Ruth to stay for some time with his family and then suggests their departure back to America. He seems all time negotiating terms with his family members and trying to make compromises.

4. Conclusion

Pinter's play '*The Homecoming*' is the home departure and not the coming because it carries the meaning of abandoning pure human nature of morals and mores. In other words, the sense of departure is more explicitly highlighted than that of coming, especially when Teddy and the rest of the family members find his leaving alone the best option available for them all to cope with the new experience.

The Homecoming is a big success and a prototype of the theatre of cruelty. Through the play, Pinter managed to make society, represented by the audience, question what has been unquestionable. He called for a radical reformation of thinking traditions and living practices. He broke the norms and rebelled against the traditional kingdom of "fake" principles. We, the humans, imprisoned ourselves in jails we created and called principles. We waged bloody wars and slaughtered innocents for their sake.

The Homecoming is loaded with heavy psychology, especially Freudian, which is the best tool to dive deep into the unconscious and interpret characters' repressed experiences and feelings. Not only did Pinter focus on characters, but he also paid attention to objects surrounding them, such as furniture, to associate the internal with the external world. The pauses and ellipses he used in the text reflected miscommunication amongst the characters and disconnection between their minds.

As previously explained in the Discussion Section, Pinter uncovered the different psychological phenomena hidden deep in the characters: projection, oedipal complex, sibling rivalry, and fear of intimacy. Moreover, he implicitly blamed parents for being the root of the dysfunctional family that produces unhealthy individuals and breaks down society. He also called for questioning the norms and the principles that his social community took for granted. Pinter had a message, a mission, and a strong faith in art.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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