

HAROLD PINTER AND THE POLITICS OF LOVE

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In several plays by Harold Pinter, marriage is presented as a very problematic phenomenon. Frustrating for both partners, the relationship ends up by becoming an open conflict in which the two parties, overtly or not, try to take control. Sometimes the conflict results in authentic struggles for power.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir points out that marriage is in reality intended to suppress woman's erotic life, a fact which leads to her sexual frustration and the deliberate acceptance of the situation by men. She also remarks that ". . . even when sexual love exists before the marriage or awakens during the honeymoon, it very rarely persists through the long years to come."¹ As a consequence, marriage gives rise to fantastic comedies and play-acting between the partners, a situation which may threaten to destroy the boundary between appearance and reality; and indeed in extreme cases definite perversion does appear. The present article briefly examines these aspects of marriage as they are illustrated in three of Harold Pinter's plays: *The Homecoming*, *The Collection*, and *The Lover*, which does not mean that they exhaust the subject in the British author's work.

In *The Homecoming*, the professor of Philosophy Teddy and his wife, Ruth, return to London after six years in America. They come to spend a few days with the husband's family. They are his father, Max, a widower and former butcher, his driver and brother-in-law, Sam; and Teddy's brothers Lenny and Joey, respectively a pimp and a boxer. None of the members of the family knows that Teddy either had married or that he has three sons.

Later, the family proposes that Ruth stay, become a prostitute as well as a readily available sexual partner. After disclosing that Max's late wife Jessie committed adultery with his best friend in the back seat of his car, Sam collapses. Teddy leaves for America. After skilfully conducting negotiations with the family in strict business terms, Ruth decides to remain.

Absurd as the situation might seem at first sight, after the analysis of some aspects of the play, Ruth's final decision to stay may appear to be the natural consequence of a marriage which reveals itself incapable of fulfilling her desires.

1

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 498.

If Act I presents Teddy's homecoming ("I was born here"²), Act 2 suggests that the homecoming may also be Ruth's: "I was born quite near here" (*H*, p. 53). Bernard Dukore points out:

Even Act I hints at her homecoming. When she leaves for a solitary

walk,

The mere fact that Teddy goes up alone to his former room while his wife prefers to go for a walk already suggests that there must be something wrong with their marriage, as well as it may serve to prove her acquaintance with the neighbourhood.

When Ruth returns to the house after her solitary walk, she meets Lenny, and a struggle for domination starts at once, a situation through which she easily becomes aware of his technique of using insults and sexual provocations, and therefore, by avoiding revealing herself, she ends up by achieving a position of power. When he twice asks her if he might hold her hand, she asks why. By refusing to respond in terms that he dictates, she controls the situation. At the end of the scene she is totally victorious:

She picks up the glass and lifts it towards him.

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.

RUTH. Oh, I was thirsty.

She smiles at him, puts the glass down, goes into the hall and up the stairs.

2

Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming*, (New York: Grove, 1966), p. 22. All further references to this work will appear in the text under the abbreviation *H*.

3

Bernard F. Dukore, *Harold Pinter*, (London: MacMillan, 1982), p. 75.

He follows into the hall and shouts up the stairs.

LENNY. What was that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal? (*H*, pp. 34-35)

What becomes clear from this first confrontation of Ruth with one of the members of Teddy's family is that she is not naïve, as she is aware of the specialized vocabulary used by a pimp, and that she is perfectly able of making use of her personal attributes in order to achieve her goals. Furthermore, the scene, filled with several hints of erotic overtones, may express the existence of a lack of sexual satisfaction in her life, when she says: "Oh, I was thirsty." Indications of such a lack mount as the play develops and more details about Ruth and Teddy's life in America are revealed. His description of Ruth's role is very revealing of his self-centredness and consequent ignorance of his wife's needs:

She's a great help to me over there. She's a wonderful wife and mother. She's a very popular woman. She's got lots of friends. It's a great life, at the University . . . you know . . . it's a very good life. We've got a lovely house . . . we've got all . . . we've got everything we want. It's a very stimulating environment. (*H*, p. 50)

It becomes clear from Teddy's words that he regards his wife as a mere complement to his own life, someone who is there to serve him, take care of his children, and be displayed to his friends and other people. This becomes even more evident when he tries to convince her that it is time to return to America: "You can help me with my lectures when we get back. I'd love that. I'd be so grateful for it really." (*H*, p. 55)

The contrast between Ruth's sensuality and Teddy's lack of sensitiveness is stressed in a scene in which Ruth and the pimp brother are able to express themselves in, at least, apparently but definitely convincing philosophical terms, while Teddy either refuses or reveals himself unable to do it. His shortcomings become more apparent when the former two seem to demonstrate a better understanding of the subject on which he is supposed to be the specialist than he does:

LENNY. Well, I want to ask you something. Do you detect a certain logical incoherence in the central affirmations of Christian theism?

TEDDY. That question doesn't fall within my province.

(. . .)

LENNY. But you're a philosopher. Come on. Be frank. What do you make of all this business of being and not being?

TEDDY. What do you make of it?

LENNY. Well, for instance, take a table. Philosophically speaking. What is it?

TEDDY. A table. (*H*, pp. 51-52)

At this point, Ruth enters the conversation, and although her remarks lack philosophical sophistication and serve more to reveal her dominant sexuality, they do demonstrate a practical and vital concern in such questions that her husband lacks:

Look at me. I . . . move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear . . . underwear . . . which moves with me . . . it captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg . . . moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict your observation to that? (*H*, pp. 52-53)

Martin Esslin comments:

The association of ideas in Ruth's mind seems to be: if a table, philosophically speaking, is more than just a table, if there is another plane of reality behind its appearance, this to her is analogous to the contrast between the outward appearance of a woman, and what is beneath that appearance: the underwear, the flesh, the sex.⁴

That is precisely what Teddy fails to understand, or refuses to do, and the differences between the two go gradually accumulating, as Ruth's description of America, totally opposed to Teddy's, shows: "It's all rock. And sand. It stretches . . . so far . . . everywhere you look. And there's lots of insects there" (*H*, p. 53). The picture she presents is clearly that of loneliness, of a life devoid of any future prospects as expressed by the barren environment which surrounds her. Steven H. Gale goes straight to the point when he says: ". . . since marriage and the family have failed to satisfy Ruth's primary appetites, they are not fulfilling their functions and may be discarded."⁵ The moment this is fully understood, then we are ready to accept Ruth's decision to stay. She has some requirements though:

I would want at least three rooms and a bathroom. (...) I'd want a dressing-room, a rest-room, and a bedroom. (...) A personal maid?(...) You would have to regard your original outlay simply as a capital investment.(...) You'd supply my wardrobe, of course? (...) I'd need an awful lot. Otherwise I wouldn't be content. (...) I would naturally want to draw up an inventory of everything I would need, which would require your signatures in the presence of witnesses. (...) All aspects of the agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified

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Martin Esslin, *Pinter: A Study of His Plays*, (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 144.

5

Steven H. Gale, *Butter's Going up: A Critical Analysis of Harold Pinter's Work*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1977), p. 153.

to our mutual satisfaction before we finalized the contract. (*H*, pp. 76-78)

The businesslike manner in which she settles the details of her contract and place of work with Teddy's family clearly demonstrates that anything which brings her closer to the satisfaction of her repressed desires will be acceptable to her. In a very businesslike manner she decides to leave behind a career of frustration as a mother and housewife and take up what seems to be a more rewarding job: that of a prostitute. This will possibly give her a better financial standing and independence, as well as the opportunity to fulfill her erotic fantasies and have a more rewarding sexual life, not only with prospective customers but also with the family members. Between two jobs, she chooses the one which seems to her to be the more advantageous. As Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson remark:

By agreeing to satisfy the household's sexual needs (while driving a hard bargain and remaining a 'tease'), Ruth also gains a paradoxical independence, since by becoming a whore she is able to break free from the academic straitjacket of the philosopher's lowly life.⁶

The new situation will not only satisfy her psychological needs, for she will become the centre of attention and will not merely be her husband's servant any longer, but also she asserts a position of power inside her new "family." This is well expressed in the final scene of the play in which she sits in a central position, with Teddy's father and brothers arranged about her as in a traditional family portrait.

In *The Collection*, Pinter presents the couple James and Stella, whose relationship is perturbed by her assertion that she had been unfaithful to him with Bill during a collection show of the fashion business in Leeds. Bill, a young man living with middle-aged Harry in what may probably be a homosexual relationship, denies it. A series of conflicting stories emerge: Bill accompanied Stella to her room but nothing happened; they kissed and that was all; they sat in the lounge and discussed but did not commit adultery; they did not meet.

Where does the truth lie? In order to find it, and perhaps fascinated by the man whom his wife would find attractive, James goes after Bill. Aiming to preserve his relationship, Harry visits Stella who denies everything. Harry confronts the other men with that denial, but Bill does not confirm this story and Stella does not confirm anything to James either.

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Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson, *Harold Pinter*, (New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 69.

The first appearance of James and Stella clearly brings the impression that they are not getting along very well:

STELLA. What are you going to do?

He looks at her, with a brief smile, then away.

Jimmy . . .

Pause.

Are you going out?

Pause.

Will you . . . be in tonight?

*JAMES reaches for a glass ashtray, flicks ash and regards the ashtray. STELLA turns and leaves the room. The front door slams. JAMES continues regarding the ashtray.*⁷

The scene suggests that the relationship has not been completely rewarding and the action results from the dissatisfaction of the characters. Everything will revolve out of a need for love which will result in a need for domination, as the four people attempt to protest, solidify, or simply redefine the bonds between themselves and their partners. And mystery will be of fundamental importance for this redefinition. Arthur Ganz points out:

What we do know beyond question is that each character has been tormented by the possibility of the relationship, that each character has used the occasion to torment others, to threaten, to rouse jealousy, to exert power. With perfect clarity Pinter has portrayed in both the homosexual and the heterosexual households the lurking presence of pride, fear, hostility, of love turning to boredom or to imprisonment.⁸

What is certain in *The Collection* is the fact that only Bill and Stella know what really happened, if anything happened at all. What they do is use their imagination in order to satisfy their fantasies and, at the same time, gain the upper hand in relationships which

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Harold Pinter, "The Collection," in *Plays: Two*, (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 122-123. All further references to this work will appear in the text under the abbreviation *C*.

8

Arthur Ganz, "Introduction," in *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Arthur Ganz (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972), p. 5.

have not been fully pleasant up to that moment. By changing the story each time it is told, both Bill and Stella end up by achieving a stronger position in their respective pairs. This happens because they leave their partners in the ignorance of what really happened, as the final scene clearly indicates, by showing that Stella is satisfied with the new situation:

JAMES. You just sat and talked about what you would do if you went to your room. That's what you did.

Pause.

Didn't you?

Pause.

That's the truth . . . isn't it?

STELLA *looks at him, neither confirming nor denying. Her face is friendly, sympathetic.*

(. . .)

Curtain (C, p. 157)

If, in the beginning of the play, it is James who does not answer Stella's questions and ignores her presence, now the situation is reversed. He is unsure of his wife and has been put on the defensive, unable to get hold of the real, impotent in relation to his wife's mystery and the impenetrability of the mind.

At the beginning of *The Lover*, Richard casually asks Sarah, his wife, if her lover is coming in the afternoon while he is at work. Later, he admits he has a whore. The following morning, when he leaves, Sarah changes into a tight, low-cut, black dress and to high-heeled shoes. She lowers the blinds and receives her lover, Max, who turns out to be Richard, in a suede jacket, without a tie and light slacks. They enact erotic rituals.

Although Richard attempts to terminate their roles of lover and whore, she seduces him into continuing. At the end, however, the fantasy roles are no longer separable from and have perhaps permanently taken over their roles as husband and wife.

The Lover seems to be the perfect example of the need that some couples feel to appeal to fantastic comedies and play-acting in order to sustain their relationships. In this play the limits between reality and appearance end up by being totally blurred in the couple's endless play-actings.

The play presents a struggle for domination manifested in dialogues in which controlling the conversation means dominating. What is apparent from the dialogues is a permanent conflict between banter versus seduction, or respectability versus sexuality:

SARAH. How could I forget you?
RICHARD. Quite easily, I should think.
SARAH. But I'm in your house.
RICHARD. With another.
SARAH. But it's you I love.
RICHARD. I beg your pardon?
SARAH. But it's you I love.⁹

Here, the separation is clearly stated, the role of the lover being reserved for the performance of activities which do not fit into a supposedly "decent" husband-wife relationship, a sacred union in which love would be devoid of sex. In this case, the role reserved to the husband would be that of the provider of understanding:

MAX. How does he bear it, your husband? How does he bear it? Doesn't he smell me when he comes back in the evenings? What does he *say*? He must be mad. Now -- what's the time -- half past four -- now when he's sitting in his office, knowing what's going on here, what does he *feel*, how does he bear it?
(. . .)
SARAH. He's happy for me. He appreciates the way I am. He understands. (*L*, p. 182)

For Richard, the separation of roles is evident. The requirements for a wife are very different from those which qualify a woman as a sexual partner. They cannot exist simultaneously in the same person, as becomes evident when the subject of Richard's "whore" (and not merely a mistress) is brought about:

SARAH. I must say I find your attitude to women rather alarming.
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 best with all lust's cunning. Nothing more.
(. . .)
SARAH. I'm sorry your affair possesses so little dignity.
RICHARD. The dignity is in my marriage.
SARAH. Or sensibility.
RICHARD. The sensibility likewise. I wasn't looking for such attributes. I find them in you. (*L*, p. 169)

Sexual and emotional needs are unreconcilable for Richard and Sarah. Respectfulness, love, dignity, sensibility which must exist in marriage are opposed to lustful pleasure in their minds. As a consequence, they appeal to a ritualistic series of erotic games and play-acting.

As the play approaches its ending, there are several indications that Richard, perhaps having an insight of the growing danger of loss of their own identities, attempts to change the situation. First it is Max who declares that it must stop, and she fails to seduce him. Then, Richard himself does it and she is distraught, but manages to seduce him. There is a difference this time, though: she seduces her husband as a whore, thus manipulating him into the role of lover, and making him regard her as a whore in the final scene:

SARAH. Would you like me to change? Would you like me to change my clothes? I'll change for you, darling. Shall I? Would you like that?

Silence. She is very close to him.

RICHARD. Yes. (. . .) Change your clothes. (. . .) You lovely whore.

They are still, kneeling, she leaning over him. (L, p. 196)

Thus the two separate worlds end up by mingling into one. Striving to protect their marriage, Sarah manages to adapt the old game to a new situation, for now Richard's role of lover invades and dominates his marital world. However, as Alrene Sykes remarks,

. . . it is not a reassuring ending (. . .). From one point of view, Sarah has just managed to save from destruction "the game" which means so much to her, just managed to divert Richard from smashing their fantasy to pieces. What however of tomorrow or the day after? What will happen to their relationship if the fantasy does break down? ¹⁰

The three plays that have been here examined concern a woman for whom a conventional marriage involves withdrawal from a satisfyingly vital sexual life. Sarah is helped in alleviating this state by her husband, who takes the part of a fantasy lover. Stella, on the other hand, creates the fantasy lover herself, thus stimulating her husband by telling him of her supposed involvement with a lover during the fashion show. Ruth, on her part,

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Alrene Sykes, *Harold Pinter*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), p. 109.

envisages the possibility of escaping from the bonds of an arid life in a new situation which will apparently give her some economic freedom and the possibility to exert her repressed sexuality.

Through the use of different stratagems the three women try to escape the role which society reserved for them, thus establishing situations of conflict that will characterize marriage as being an authentic field of battle in which a permanent struggle for power takes place, one of the partners always trying to dominate the other. An authentic, rewarding relationship therefore appears to be impossible in situations which are not based upon equality and mutual recognition of rights. As long as repression is maintained, the search for fantasy and other wayouts will make themselves necessary in people's attempts to escape from the bonds imposed by a hypocritical society.

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