The Homecoming Study Guide

The Homecoming by Harold Pinter

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Contents

[The Homecoming Study Guide......1]

[Contents......2]

[Introduction......4]

[Author Biography......5]

[Plot Summary......7]

[Act 1, Scene 1......10]

[Act 1, Scene 2......12]

[Act 1, Scene 3......15]

[Act 2, Scene 1......17]

[Act 2, Scene 2......20]

[Characters......24]

[Themes......27]

[Style......32]

[Historical Context......34]

[Critical Overview......36]

[Criticism......38]

[Critical Essay #1......39]

[Critical Essay #2......43]

[Critical Essay #3......45]

[Adaptations......51]

[Topics for Further Study......52]

[Compare and Contrast......53]

[What Do I Read Next?......54]

[Further Study......55]

[Bibliography......56]

Copyright Information..57

Introduction

The Homecoming, now considered by many critics to be Harold Pinter's masterpiece, was not universally admired when it was first produced in England by the Royal Shakespeare Company at London's Aldwych Theatre, on June 3, 1965. Many critics, while praising the production directed by Peter Hall, found the play itself to be baffling and enigmatic in the extreme. Harold Hobson, critic for the *Sunday Times* and an early proponent of Pinter's, predicted that the play would "suffer In the estimation of audiences who will perceive an aesthetic defect that does not exist, In the place of a moral vacuum that does." Despite numerous viewer reactions that verified Hobson's forecast, *The Homecoming* had a long run to packed houses in London before moving to the United States.

The Broadway opening of *The Homecoming* on January 3, 1967, at the Music Box Theatre was greeted with great excitement Repeating its London success, the production had a long run in spite of some negative reviews, the most notable by Walter Kerr of the *New York Times* In March *The Homecoming* won the Antionette ("Tony") Perry Award as best play on Broadway and in May it was voted best new play on Broadway by the New York Drama Critics' Circle. It also received the Whitbread Anglo-American award for the best British play of the year. This sensational success established Pinter's reputation in New York, opening the door to widespread production of his subsequent work While baffled by the fact that the startling action of the play seemed to lack any *rational* explanations, both critics and audiences responded to Pinter's gift for dramatic suspense and sharp, biting comedy. *The Homecoming* does in fact deal with many themes, such as emotional impotence, Oedipal desires, personal loneliness and isolation, appearance and reality, and familial power struggles, to mention a few; and, audiences and critics alike sensed that there is a great deal more going on in the play than can be easily articulated. As John Russell Taylor put it in *Plays and Players* magazine, "The secret of the play does not lie in our providing a neat crossword-puzzle solution". Despite-and perhaps because of-the play's ambiguity, *The Homecoming* has remained a centerpiece in Pinter's canon. New productions of the play are frequent as actors, directors, and audiences attempt new interpretations of Pinter's work.

Author Biography

Harold Pinter was born in the northern borough of Hackney, a working-class section in London, England, on October 10, 1930. Pinter's father, Hyman (Jack) was a hard-working tailor of women's apparel and his mother, Frances, a homemaker. The Pinter family was part of the Immigrant wave of Jews that arrived in London around the turn of the century. Pinter's forebears came from Poland and Odessa and brought with them a love of culture and learning. At the outbreak of World War IT in 1939, Pinter was evacuated to a castle in Cornwall for a year where, away from his loving home for the first time, he suffered loneliness, bewilderment, separation, and loss-themes that recur in all his works. He also discovered just how sly and nasty a group of boys isolated from their families could be back in Hackney, where he spent most of the war years, he was constantly made aware of the impermanence of life.

Pinter attended Hackney Downs Grammar School from 1944 to 1948, where his talents were inspired by Joe Brearley, an English teacher. Pinter wrote for the school magazine and discovered a flair for acting in school productions. He also was one of a group who called themselves "The Boys," a sort of gang tied together by their common love for intellectual adventure. Along with other boyish pursuits, the group would often gather and argue about literature. Although the Boys were not immune from the desire for domination and the clashes brought about by sexual competition, many remained friends throughout their adult lives.

On leaving school, Pinter received a grant to study acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, but he soon became disenchanted with the academic process and left after two terms In 1948 he was called up for national military service and declared himself a conscientious objector, a status that was denied him. He was tried and expected to go to prison but instead was fined thirty pounds by a sympathetic magistrate and released. In 1951 he resumed his acting education at the Central School of Speech and Drama. He then spent eighteen months touring Ireland with the theatrical company of Anew McMaster followed by the 1953 London season with the company of Donald Wolfit. Following this activity, he took on the stage name David Baron and began acting in provincial repertory theatres. During tIns acting stint, Pinter met actress Vivian Merchant, with whom he often worked. The couple were married in 1956.

On May 9,1957, one of the Hackney "Boys," Henry Woolfe, asked Pinter to Write a play to be produced six days later at Bristol University. Pinter, writing in the afternoons between morning rehearsals and evening performances, completed ills first play, *The Room,* in four days. The production was a success and was subsequently entered in the *Sunday Times* student drama festival several months later. Harold Hobson, an influential drama critic for the paper, was so taken with the play that he wrote a highly favorable review.

Hobson's accolade brought Pinter to the attention of Michael Codron, a young London producer, who asked the young actor if he had any other works he'd like to see produced. Pinter sent Codron *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter.* The producer staged the former, which opened on April 28, 1958, to generally unfavorable reviews. Hobson, however, reviewed the play in the *Sunday Times* four days after opening night, stating that, based on the evidence of this play, "Mr. Pinter possesses the most original, disturbing, and arresting talent in theatrical London." Despite such strong praise, it was too late to save that production of *The Birthday Party* and the show soon closed. *The Dumb Waiter* later had its first English production, coupled with *The Room,* at the Hampstead Theatre Club in 1960.

By the late 1950s, Pinter was becoming a playwright in increasing demand. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) commissioned Pinter to . write a radio drama, a piece he called *Something in Common,* which was not produced. The BBC then commissioned another sixty-minute play, *A Slight Ache* (1959), the first of Pinter's many (produced) plays Written for radio or television. Also in 1959, Pinter wrote a series of comic sketches that were included in popular revues. In 1960, Pinter had his first major theatrical success with *The Caretaker.* Pinter, now recognized as an important writer, worked prolifically on his dramas, producing such works as *Night School (1960), The Dwarfs (1960), The Collection* (1961), *The Lover* (1963), *The Tea Party* (1965), and *The Basement* (1967). He also began working in the medium of film, writing the screenplays for *The Servant* (1963) and *The Pumpkin Eater* (1964), which both received major awards.

The Homecoming, Pinter's third full-length play, was first produced at the New Theatre in Cardiff, Wales, in 1965. Under the auspices of the Royal Shakespeare Company, it moved to the Aldwych Theatre in London later that year. In 1967 the production made its American debut on Broadway at the Music Box Theatre. The play became a sensational success and established Pinter as a significant dramatist in the United States.

Throughout the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and 90s, Pinter has continued to flourish in theatre as a playwright, director (of both his own works and those by other playwrights), and occasionally as an actor. He also continues to write for films, including *The Last Tycoon, The French Lieutenant's Woman* (adapted from the book by John Fowles), and *Turtle Diary,* as well as adaptations of his own plays (including *The Birthday Party, Betrayal,* and *The Homecoming).*

Pinter and Merchant had one child, a son named Daniel, before divorcing in 1980. He remarried later that year, taking the writer Lady Antonia Fraser as his wife. Pinter's work has spanned five decades, and he remains one of the worlds most respected and widely produced playwrights.

Plot Summary

Act I, Scene 1

The play opens with Lenny reading the newspaper. Max enters looking for scissors and is ignored by Lenny. Max talks about his late wife Jessie and his late friend MacGregor. He speaks of Jessie with both fondness and shocking disapproval' "She wasn't such a bad woman. Even though it made me sick just to look at her rotten stinking face, she wasn't such a bad bitch." Max also talks of his special understanding of horses. Lenny tells Max to shut up and then says that Max's cooking is fit only for dogs. Sam enters and Max insults him about his driving and the fact that he is not married. Joey enters from a workout at the gym, and Max turns on him, saying that his trouble as a boxer is that he doesn't know how to attack or defend himself. Max also threatens to throw Sam out when he is too old to pay his way. Sam pointedly reminds Max that Mac and Jessie were very close friends. The scene ends in blackout.

Act I, Scene 2

The next scene, a few hours later, opens with Teddy and Ruth standing at the threshold to the room. Teddy is Max's eldest son, a Ph.D. who teaches philosophy at an American university. Ruth is his wife of six years about whom the rest of the family know nothing. They have been on a trip to Europe, and Teddy has brought her to meet the family. Ruth, though at first claiming to be tired, decides to go out for a walk. After Ruth leaves, Lenny enters. The reunion between the two brothers is civil but without any sense of warmth. Teddy goes to bed and Lenny goes and gets a clock that he suspects of disturbing his sleep.

Ruth enters and after some surprising small talk, says that she is Teddy's wife Lenny pays no attention to that. He launches into a long story which ends with his beating up a whore, whom he would have killed except for the bother of getting rid of the body. He then tells another long story that ends with his beating up an old woman, whether true or not, these tales are obviously meant to intimidate Ruth They do not. There follows a wonderfully theatrical power play with Ruth dominating Lenny by using a glass of water to taunt him with sexual favors Ruth goes to bed leaving Lenny alone. Max enters and Lenny turns on him asking about the night he was conceived. Max spits at him and says he will drown in his own blood.

Act I, Scene 3

The. next scene opens at six-thirty the next morning. Joey is working out. Max enters complaining that Sam is in his kitchen. He calls Sam into the room and belittles him. Teddy and Ruth enter, and Max calls Ruth a "smelly scruffer," a "stinking pox-ridden slut," and says that there hasn't been a whore in the house since Jessie died. Ruth seems to be unfazed by this verbal abuse. Joey apologizes for Max, saying he is an old man. Max hits Joey in the stomach with all his might. Joey staggers across the room, and Max begins to collapse with the exertion; Sam tries to help Max, and Max hits him in the head with his cane. Max then asks Ruth if she is a mother, seems pleased when she says she has three boys, and asks Teddy for a cuddle. Teddy accepts.

Act II, Scene 1

It is just after dinner on the same day. Ruth serves coffee, and the men smoke cigars. Max praises Ruth and tells her that Jessie was the backbone of the family, that she taught the boys' .all the morality they know. . . every single bit of the moral code they live by." Max then berates Sam and complains that he has worked hard all his life to support his brother and his own family-"three bastard sons, a slut-bitch of a wife"-and even claims to have suffered the pains of childbirth. After further abusing Sam, Max turns to Teddy and gives his marriage his blessing, saying that Ruth is a charming woman. Sam leaves.

Lenny tries to engage Teddy in philosophical speculation about a table. Teddy refuses to be drawn in. Ruth points out that when she moves her leg her underwear moves with her and that perhaps the fact that her lips move is more important than the words which come through them. After a silence Joey, Max, and Lenny leave to go to the gym. Teddy suggests to Ruth that it is time to return home to America. Ruth seems uninterested. Teddy goes to pack. Lenny enters, and he and Ruth talk about the weather. Then Ruth says that before she went to America she had been a "model for the body," and she seems to have a longing for that life again. Teddy enters.

Lenny and Ruth dance slowly and kiss. Max and Joey enter and Joey delightfully says Ruth is a tart. He grabs her and starts to make love to her on the sofa. Max makes small talk with Teddy and praises Ruth in extremely sentimental terms. Ruth suddenly pushes Joey away. stands up, and demands a drink. She further demands food, that the record be turned off. and that she be given a particular kind of glass. She then asks if the family have read Teddy's critical works. Teddy says that they wouldn't understand them.

Act II, Scene 2

The following scene takes place that evening and opens with Teddy in his coat sitting dejectedly with his suitcases beside him. Sam asks if Teddy remembers MacGregor and says that Teddy was always his mother's favorite. When Lenny enters, Sam leaves. Lenny accuses Teddy of stealing his sandwich and is outraged when Teddy admits that he did. Joey enters: he has been in his room with Ruth for two hours but he didn't get "all the way." Max and Sam enter and Max demands, "Where's the whore?" Max commiserates with Joey and says that it might be good to have Ruth stay with them. Teddy says that she should go home to her children. The problem of supporting Ruth is discussed, and Lenny suggests that she could pay her own way by working as a whore. Max, Joey, and Lenny agree that this is a good idea.

When Ruth enters, Teddy explains what the family has in mind. Ruth says, "How very nice of them." Her demands, however, are very specific: a flat with three rooms and a bath, a maid, complete wardrobe, and that the original outlay must be viewed as a capital investment. She demands a contract to be signed before witnesses. All is agreed to. Sam then bursts out with the information that MacGregor had Jessie in the back of Sam's cab as he drove them along. He collapses. No one helps him. Teddy complains that he had counted on Sam to drive him to the airport and leaves to find a cab. Ruth sits in Max's chair, Joey sits on the floor and puts his head in her lap. Max complains that he will be left out, that she thinks he is an old man, and he collapses. As Max crawls toward Ruth, asking her for a kiss, Lenny sullenly stands watching.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The play opens with Lenny sitting and looking at a newspaper in the large front room of the old London house he shares with his father and brother. His father, Max, comes in, looking for the scissors because he wants to cut something out of the paper. He thinks that Lenny's paper is own, but Lenny tells him it's not. Max sits and asks for a cigarette, and when Lenny doesn't give him one, he takes one out of his own pocket and lights it. Max recalls threateningly how he used to hang around with a tough called MacGregor, a big man who was fond of Lenny's mother, whom Max speaks of in nasty terms. Lenny asks Max for advice on betting on a horse, which gets Max talking about his days at the Epsom racecourse. He speaks of his instinctive understanding for animals, and how he could look female horses in the eye and know whether they could go the distance. Lenny and Max bicker about Max's cooking, leading Max to grab his cane as if to hit Lenny. Lenny mocks him.

Max's brother Sam comes in after a long day's work as a chauffeur. He offers Max a cigar from a box he got as a tip from an American fare, and as he and Max smoke cigars, Sam brags about being the best chauffeur in the firm. He goes on to explain that he's the best because he's the best driver and because he doesn't take liberties, i.e. speak when he's not supposed to.

As Lenny goes out, Max taunts Sam about Sam's not being married and asks whether it's because he's too busy having sex with clients in the back seat of the limousine. Sam protests that he's never done that kind of thing in his life, unlike "other people." Max wonders what he means, but Sam says nothing more. Max tells him that when he finally does get married he can bring his bride home, and there'll be a big family party. Sam doubts that there will ever be a bride, not like Max's bride Jessie, whom Sam describes as a charming woman.

Max's second son Joey, a boxer, comes in after working out and wonders if there's any food. Max loses his temper, and as Lenny returns complains that his sons always want him to take care of them. Lenny sarcastically refers to how Max used to like tucking his sons into bed, and calls Max "Dad" even though Max tells him to stop. Max threatens Lenny with violence, and Lenny goes out again. Max then taunts Joey, saying he's got few boxing skills. Joey protests that he has lots of skills, then goes upstairs.

Max tries to get Sam to go upstairs too, but Sam wants to make another point about Jessie. He reminds Max that when he took Jessie out in the limo, he was taking care of her for Max because he wouldn't have trusted any of his other brothers - or Mac either. Max calls Sam a maggot and a grub, and says that as soon as Sam retires, he's out. Sam reminds Max that he owns part of the house; it was an inheritance from their mother. Max comments caustically that neither generation is any better than the other, describing them as "one flow of stinking pus after another." He then recalls fond memories of his father, MacGregor, who took good care of him and played with him.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

This play is written in a style that includes graphic and rough language, a great many pauses, and dialogue that gives very few clues about what's really going on between the characters. What's left unsaid is often more important than what's actually said. In other words, it's a style that relies heavily on subtext to convey its meaning, which means that we need to pay close attention and think about what's going on.

Nevertheless, we do understand some things very clearly in this scene, mostly about Max. We understand that this is a family where verbal abuse is the normal way of communicating and that Max is more abusive than anybody else. We also understand that Max has very little respect for women and that he's bitter about the way his family has turned out. We learn that Sam has perhaps a little more integrity than Max and that Max's sons are a bitter disappointment to him. In short, we clearly see an unhappy family sitting on a powder keg of resentment.

There are two important elements of foreshadowing in this scene. First, when Max speaks of being able to understand a female horse through looking in her eyes, we get the sense that he's talking about women as well as about female horses. This foreshadows what will happen between Max, his sons, and Ruth later in the play. Second, when Max becomes angry at Sam's mention of "other people," we sense that Max thinks Sam means someone in particular and wonder if he's actually talking about Max. This foreshadows what we find out later about Max's wife Jessie.

The question of what makes a good father is an important theme that appears for the first time in this scene. We see Max clearly as a monster of a father, constantly abusing and belittling his sons. This contrasts vividly with his description of his own father as a loving, caring, playful parent. Later, when Max's son Teddy mentions his two sons, we wonder what kind of father he'll be and what kind of relationship he'll have with them.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Max's third son, Teddy, arrives with his wife Ruth. Teddy finds that a lot of things haven't changed - the lock is the same, his room is still there, and his family is all still there. He offers Ruth food and something to drink but she just sits, saying she's very tired. He reassures her that meeting his family is going to be all right, talks about the surprise that his father is going to get in the morning, and refers to being born in the house. He suggests again that they go to bed, but she decides to go for a walk to get some air. He can't understand why but lets her go.

Lenny suddenly appears and greets his brother, telling him that there's something ticking that's keeping him awake. Teddy tells him it's probably a clock and that he should have a look at to see if there's something wrong with the way it ticks. He then explains that he's visiting for just a few days and asks about Max. Lenny says he's fine. Teddy takes his suitcases upstairs and says goodnight, and Lenny watches as he goes upstairs.

Ruth returns. She and Lenny introduce themselves, make small talk, and Lenny tells her about the tick that's bothering him. He pours them a glass of water each, speaks of how strange it feels to see Teddy for the first time in so many years, and comments that he thought Teddy was in America. Ruth tells him that they do live in America but they've been on vacation in Italy and stopped off in England on their way home. Lenny talks of how he's always imagined himself as a soldier in Italy, then asks if he can hold Ruth's hand. When she asks why, he tells a long story about how he was once propositioned by a diseased prostitute and how he had responded by nearly beating her to death. When Ruth asks how he knew she was diseased, Lenny says "[he] decided she was." He then talks about envying Teddy for being a Doctor of Philosophy and for being sensitive. He tells another story of how he had been asked to help an old woman with an old-fashioned washing machine; he had realized he couldn't help her after all, sworn at her, hit her, and left.

At the conclusion of the story, he tries to take Ruth's glass, but she says she's not finished. He insists, she insists, he insists, and finally she calls him by his full name, Leonard, which he doesn't like. Only his mother called him that. He tries again to take the glass, but she dares him to sit on her lap and take a sip instead. When he gets flustered, she laughs, finishes her water, puts the glass down and leaves the room.

Lenny shouts up the stairs after her. As he drains his glass of water, Max comes downstairs, complaining about the noise and demanding an explanation. Instead of telling him the truth, Lenny asks Max about the night he was conceived, wanting to know whether Max and his mother were actually trying to have a baby or whether his conception was just an accident. When Max doesn't answer, Lenny bitterly suggests that he should have asked his dead mother. Max spits at him, then leaves. Lenny sits very still.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

The character of Teddy is a contrast to the other members of his family in a number of ways. He makes a significant effort to be sensitive to Ruth's needs, which at first seems to be different from the approach we imagine Max and the others using. He also has respect for her, which is different from the way the other males in his family view the opposite sex. Finally, he has put some distance between himself and his family by moving to America. This suggests that he's trying to break free of the generational cycle of awfulness that Max mentioned at the end of the previous scene. We wonder how Teddy is going to survive in the face of the nastiness around him.

The character of Ruth, on the other hand, is an enigma. Many of her actions, such as challenging Lenny in the way she does, seem to be somewhat strange at first glance. It's not until later in the play that we're able to understand her a little more. At this stage, though, she's intriguing to say the least. This relates to a key point about this play, and to the work of this writer in general.

As mentioned earlier, one of the things we have to do when watching or reading plays by this playwright is to watch and listen closely to determine the subtext of what's going on, what characters are really talking about, and/or what truly motivates their actions. Ruth's actions in this scene are one example of a moment we really have to pay attention to. Another is Lenny's speech about the diseased woman, which doesn't really answer Ruth's question about why he wants to hold her hand. From paying careful attention to what the story is about, we can determine at least one possible answer.

At its most basic level of meaning, Lenny's story is about a possible moment of human connection that went wrong. From this, we can infer that Lenny wants to hold Ruth's hand because he needs a moment of human connection that works, that feels good. If we accept this idea, then we can apply this understanding to other moments, circumstances and questions in the play. We can understand, for instance, what Lenny really wants later in the play when he joins in the plan to have Ruth move in; it isn't simply about easy sex. This analysis of the interaction between Lenny and Ruth is certainly not the only interpretation of this moment, but it is offered here as an example of how to think about this and other, similar moments.

All that aside, when Lenny concludes his story by saying he "decided" the prostitute was diseased, we get the clear sense that he is not only willful, but just plain nasty. We therefore get the sense that Max's earlier statement that the two generations of his family are equally awful has in fact come true. On the other hand, the story of the old woman and the violence he does to her seems almost too extreme to be believed. We might wonder whether he actually is as nasty as he says he is, or whether he's trying to impress, frighten, or intimidate Ruth by telling her what a bad boy he can be. This might be a real possibility, since immediately after he challenges her, Ruth challenges him right back. Thus, we see very real tension between the two, tension that will spread out and affect the other members of the family in later scenes.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

The next morning, Joey and Max are both up early. As Joey stretches, Max complains that he hates every room in the house. He invites Joey to join him at a football (soccer, in the United States) match in the afternoon, but Joey refuses, saying he's got to train. Max tells him he's got time to see the match and then train, but Joey still refuses. When he refuses to explain why he's refusing, Max calls Sam in from the kitchen where he's noisily washing the breakfast dishes and accuses him of making noise out of resentment. He then tells Sam, "from the heart," that he can't understand the resentment at all, saying that when their father died, he told Max to take care of his brothers, which Max did. He then loses his temper, telling Sam what a bad son he was and how useless he was in the family business. He compares him to MacGregor, who was a hard worker and a fast learner. Sam responds by suggesting that Max finish washing the dishes.

Teddy and Ruth come downstairs and surprise Max, who asks if anybody knew they were there. Nobody says anything. Before Teddy can introduce Ruth, Max asks him who said he could bring a tart (trashy woman) into the house. He goes on to verbally abuse Ruth and Teddy, even though Teddy tells him Ruth is his wife, and then tells Joey to throw them out. Joey doesn't move. As Lenny comes in, Max hits Joey hard in the stomach, then collapses from the exertion. Sam goes to help him, but Max hits him on the head with his cane.

Everybody is still as Max, Joey and Sam recover. Max then goes to Ruth and asks if she's a mother. When she says yes, and that she has three children, Max asks Teddy if he wants to cuddle and kiss his father like he did in the old days. Teddy steps toward Max, and Max laughs, telling the others that Teddy still loves his father.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

At first glance, Max's invitation to Joey seems out of character for him. We wonder why, when he's spent so much time abusing his sons, Max makes this kind of gesture. We might find an explanation in Max's comments about family at the end of the first scene. It may be that that in thinking about the kind of father he had, Max is trying to become a better father. We don't know for sure, since the question, like so many others in this play, is never specifically addressed. This is, however, one possible answer.

Max's speech to Sam about their father raises an interesting question. Max says their father told him to take care of his brothers, plural, but Sam is the only brother we ever hear about. We wonder about the other brother(s), who they are and what happened to them. One possibility, following up on Max's suggestion at the end of the first scene that the two generations of the family are repeating themselves, is that there is a third brother who put distance between himself and the rest of the family in the same way that Teddy (the third brother of the second generation) put distance between himself and his brothers.

Also in this speech, we learn more about MacGregor, and find out that he played a more important role in the family than we at first understood. This again foreshadows the tensions that arise later in the play when we discover the most significant thing that MacGregor actually did.

When Ruth and Teddy appear, we quickly move into the climax of this act - the outburst of violence from Max. First, we see what little regard he has for Teddy. Then he tries to intimidate Ruth who, interestingly, says absolutely nothing at that point, during the violence, or afterwards. We get the sense that she's just watching, getting the measure of the men around her. On the other hand, Max's display of violence against Joey and Sam isn't just about showing Ruth and Teddy who's got the power in this house; it is also about Max getting Ruth's measure, looking in her eyes to see if she, like the horses he spoke about earlier, is prepared to go the distance.

Two things are happening with Max's final lines of dialogue. On one level, Max is using the idea of a cuddle ironically. It seems pretty clear that he's daring Teddy to fight, and that cuddle in this context really means fight. On another, more psychological level, it seems that after being rejected by Joey, Max is no longer trying to become a different kind of father; he is instead accepting and embracing the fact that he lives in a violent family and believes that the only way to maintain control is through violence. We see the power Max has and maintains, but by the end of the play we see Ruth in charge, wielding a completely different kind of power. This examination of how the power shifts is the narrative through-line, or story of the play.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Max, Teddy, Lenny, and Sam smoke cigars after lunch. Joey and Ruth bring in coffee. As the men compliment Ruth on her cooking, Max reminisces about what a fine woman, good mother, and good wife Jessie was. He talks about all the expensive gifts, clothes and jewels he bought for her, and how when she was alive, they were a happy, loving family. Max then asks Sam when he's going in to work, and when Sam makes no immediate move to leave taunts him about being lazy, in the same breath describing Jessie as a "slutbitch of a wife." Sam protests again that he's the best driver at the firm, but Max again compares Sam unfavorably to MacGregor. Sam gets up, shakes Ruth's hand, and leaves.

Max and Teddy talk about Teddy's wedding, and Max says that if he'd known that it was happening he'd have paid for a proper, white wedding. He goes on to say that Ruth and Teddy have his blessing. Ruth comments that she's sure Teddy's pleased that Max is pleased with her, saying that Teddy was nervous that Max would dislike Ruth. She goes on to talk about how she was different before they got married, but Teddy interrupts and says she was exactly the same. He talks about how she's a great wife and mother and says they have a good home and a good life, with three great sons. Max asks Ruth whether she thinks they miss their mother. Teddy says of course they do.

Lenny changes the subject and asks Teddy a question related to Teddy's being a doctor of philosophy. When Teddy can't answer the question at first, Lenny pushes him harder and eventually becomes mocking. Their discussion about how words and actions relate to each other takes on a different tone when Ruth joins in, comparing that relationship to the relationship between the movement of her leg and the movement of her underwear. As Teddy stands up, ready to interrupt, Ruth goes on to say that she was born quite nearby, but then went to America and found it very different.

Max says it's time for Joey to go to the gym. Lenny says he'll walk with him. When Joey doesn't move, Max calls him again. The three of them go out.

Left alone, Teddy struggles to convince Ruth to leave with him, suggesting that it's time to go back and see the boys again and reminding her of what they'd be doing at exactly that moment. He offers to pack for her, invites her to help him with his lectures, and speaks of the good time they had in Italy. Ruth is non-committal, almost non-responsive. Teddy goes upstairs to pack.

Lenny returns. Small talk between him and Ruth turns to conversation about how fond Ruth is of a certain kind of shoe that she can't get over in America. She goes on to tell him that she was a photographic model before she married Teddy, "a model for the body." She describes how some of her shoots took place outdoors. Teddy returns with the suitcases at this point. Lenny turns on the radio and asks for one dance before they go. As Teddy watches, Lenny and Ruth slow dance and kiss.

Joey and Max return. Joey takes over from Lenny, leads Ruth to the sofa, lays her down and kisses her. Max asks Teddy whether he's leaving soon, asks when he's coming back, and reminds him that next time, he has to say whether he's bringing his wife, since he'd always be glad to meet her. Joey lies on top of Ruth, and Lenny strokes her hair, as Max berates Teddy for not telling him he was married but then comments that Ruth is a woman of feeling.

Ruth and Joey fall to the floor, Lenny prods Ruth with his foot, and Ruth suddenly pushes Joey and Lenny away and asks for a drink. When Lenny says they've got whisky, Ruth commands him to get it, turn the record off, get her something to eat, and serve the whisky in a different glass. She then asks Teddy if the family has read any of his work, and Teddy gives a long speech about how important his works are and how his family doesn't have the capacity to understand them; he calls the members of his family "objects" and says he won't become lost in their lives.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The dramatic thrust of this act, the negotiation between Ruth and the men of the family over the terms under which she'll stay, begins right away. Max's speech about Jessie is not so much about Jessie herself as it is his opening bid for Ruth's affections and attention. He speaks of the things he gave Jessie, but what he's really doing is offering those things to Ruth. This idea is borne out by the fact that Ruth asks for many of the same things when she negotiates her side of the deal at the end of the play.

Teddy's speech describing his and Ruth's life together also gives us more pieces to the puzzle of who Ruth is. Their life sounds perfect for him, but partly because of Ruth's silence and partly because of what we've seen of her before--her challenge to Lenny over the glass of water--we get the sense that it might not be perfect for her. This in turn may help us understand her apparently strange choice at the end of the play, which will be discussed in more detail.

An interesting parallel appears here, when it is revealed that Teddy and Ruth have three sons, making them the third generation in a row of a family with three sons. Given what Max has said before about the relationship between the first two generations, we have to wonder what will happen to this third generation. Teddy's behavior and his actions later suggest to us that there's hope. When Ruth doesn't answer Max's question about whether they miss her, which is another aspect of their negotiation, we suspect that the hope will come from Teddy and his fathering rather than Ruth and her mothering.

Ruth's speech about her leg is the next step in the negotiation. In spite of its context within a discussion of philosophy, it is vividly and clearly seductive. It suggests that she has sexual favors to offer. When the script says that Teddy stands, it tells us that that's all he feels able to do to prevent the negotiation from continuing while his father is in the room. Once the other three men have left, however, he quickly steps in to try to get Ruth to leave before anybody has a chance to take the negotiation further. Her reluctance to talk about leaving suggests that at the least, she's interested in continuing the negotiation in spite of the heavy hints he drops about the quality of their life together. These hints include his mentioning of the boys and of Italy, the latter reminding her that such trips are possible on his salary but wouldn't be possible here.

Her actions with Lenny and Joey later suggest that she's interested in much more. Her conversation with Lenny about shoes and modeling is another step in the negotiation, where she again hints at her sexual side through the verbal picture she paints of her past as a photographic model of the body, i.e. nude, outdoors. When Lenny dances with her, when Joey lies on the sofa with her, and when Ruth suddenly starts issuing the orders about food and drink and the music, it all takes the negotiations even further. We see Ruth take control of the situation and the men, setting up the men's competition for her affections and attention. All of this foreshadows the acts of negotiation, competition and submission in the play's final scene.

Teddy's final speech is really a crying out for independence and respect. Specifically, he's describing his work and his family in ways that he thinks will convince Ruth that life with his family is not for her. On some level, he probably knows that it's a hopeless attempt, which makes him seem even more desperate and pathetic. All in all, this scene powerfully plays out the narrative action, exploring the dynamics of how power shifts between people.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Teddy sits alone, his coat on and the suitcases nearby. Sam joins him and asks what he thought about MacGregor. When Teddy says he liked MacGregor, Sam then tells him that Teddy had been his mother's favorite and hints that he should stay for a couple more weeks.

Lenny appears and mocks Teddy for still being there, saying he'll be late for a seminar. He then asks where the sandwich he made has gone, and Teddy says he took it. Sam disappears. Lenny and Teddy confront each other, and Lenny has a long speech in which he says that the family looks up to Teddy, his having lived in America and in comfort, and that something like the deliberate theft of something as petty as a sandwich is a real let down. He suggests that the family has come to expect more from Teddy, and asks whether Teddy thinks he's given that. Teddy says yes.

Joey comes downstairs, and we learn that he's been up in a bedroom with Ruth but hasn't gotten "all the way." Lenny immediately mocks him, calling Ruth a tease, and when Teddy suggests that maybe Joey doesn't have the right touch, Lenny and Joey tell him a story in which Joey bullies a girl into having sex with him without using a condom. They think that this illustrates just how right Joey's touch actually is.

Max and Sam come in. Max asks whether "the whore" is still in bed. Lenny tells him that Joey didn't go all the way with her and calls her a tease. Max asks whether she does that to Teddy, and when Teddy says she doesn't, Joey erupts angrily and says she does. Lenny says that Joey is just frustrated and jealous. Max suggests that maybe it's time to ask her to stay. Teddy says that Ruth is not well and that it's time to go back to the children, but Max says he's got a lot of experience taking care of people who are unwell. Sam jumps in and argues against even trying to keep Ruth there, but Max ups the stakes and the tension by talking about how much it will cost to keep her there and treat her in the manner to which she's accustomed. Max asks everybody to contribute, including Teddy, who reacts with anger.

Lenny suggests that Ruth needs to earn some of her own money, and proposes that he take her down to Greek Street and put her "on the game" (make her a prostitute). He suggests limiting her to four hours a night, which will leave her with energy to take care of all the needs of the men at home. Joey protests, saying he doesn't want to share her with a lot of slobs. Lenny reassures him that he's got a high class list of clients. When Joey protests further, Max says that he'd better shut up or he'll send her right back to America. He then asks Teddy whether this stringing sex out for two hours is a habit or just playing. Teddy reluctantly supposes it was just love play. Lenny offers his professional opinion that that is indeed all it was, and comes up with the idea that Teddy act as an American agent, referring high class friends and colleagues who are coming over to London to them so that they can enjoy Ruth's company.

Ruth comes downstairs, smiles, and sits. Teddy tells her that the family has invited her to stay, and suggests that if she wants to stay they can manage without her back home. Ruth says it's very kind of them, but wonders whether she'd be too much trouble. Max protests that it would be lovely to have a woman in the house again, since it's felt somewhat empty since Jessie died. Teddy tells her she'd have to pay her own way, but Max says she'd only have to make a little money while they wait for Joey to make it big as a boxer. Teddy suggests one last time that she can come home with him, but Lenny jumps in and offers her a flat. She insists upon a large flat, refuses to pay back the costs of setting her up in the flat, and insists that they must supply her wardrobe. She goes on to insist that everything be drawn up in proper contract form and signed in the presence of witnesses. Just as Ruth says it might be a workable arrangement, Sam rushes forward, announces that MacGregor made love with Jessie in the back of his limousine, and collapses. At first, everybody thinks he's dead, but Lenny sees he's still breathing.

Ruth says again that Max's idea is very attractive, but delays making a firm agreement until later. Teddy prepares to go, shakes hands with Max, who says it was wonderful to see him, and offers him a photo of his grandfather, Max's father, which Teddy takes. He shakes hands with Lenny and says goodbye to Joey, who doesn't shake hands. Just before he goes, Ruth tells him to not be a stranger.

There is a moment of stillness after he's gone, and then Joey kneels and puts his head in Ruth's lap. Lenny watches as Max paces, complains that Ruth is going to think he is too old, and then stammers about how he's not sure that Ruth understands exactly what is expected of her. He falls to his knees and sobs, protesting that he's not an old man, and begs her to kiss him. She just strokes Joey's hair as Lenny watches.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Sam's questioning Teddy about MacGregor and his reference to Jessie are, on one level, attempts at comforting Teddy and trying to convince him to stay and fight for Ruth. On another level, because of what Sam says about MacGregor and Jessie later, we almost wonder whether Sam is hinting that MacGregor is Teddy's real father. Again, this is one of those ideas that surface after consideration of the play but which may explain why things are said when they're said and in the way they're said.

The confrontation about the sandwich, of course, isn't really about the sandwich. Taking the sandwich was Teddy's small way of taking revenge on Lenny for Lenny's taking Ruth, but when Teddy answers yes to Lenny's question, saying that he does, in fact, live a life with a little more grace, generosity and liberality than his family, he is no longer talking about the sandwich. He's actually talking about a life in which other people are respected, other people's wives are respected, and not everybody is out to abuse and manipulate other people. In other words, Teddy is saying that yes, his life is better than his brothers' lives.

The action from this point on takes on an even nastier tone than before, if that's possible. On one level the way that Max and Lenny discuss Ruth, as little more than a piece of meat to be bargained with and about, is shocking in its bluntness and disregard for both her and Teddy. On another level, it's actually another manifestation of the brutality of this family, as Max and Lenny seem to be deliberately and cruelly trying to hurt Teddy by speaking of his wife in this fashion. It is violence of language and idea, as opposed to the physical violence we saw earlier. As such, it's a clear statement of the play's theme, that it's impossible to escape from the cycle of violence leading to more violence.

The point at which Ruth is presented with the option to stay is the climax of the negotiations. At this point, the narrative has set up the tensions and conflicts and built them up to such a level that we really don't know what's going to happen next; this scene is not only the climax of the negotiations, but also the climax of the play. The question we are left asking is "Why do Ruth and Teddy act the way they do?"

In Ruth's case there are no clear explanations offered in the text, so we look for answers in what she does and in what she achieves. In agreeing to the men's demands, she puts herself in a position of power, asking for clothes, a large apartment, and money; she knows that because the men want something from her, they're prepared to give those things to her. This suggests to us that she might lack these things in her life back home, an idea supported by the way Teddy had described that life earlier. Her demands indicate that she wants these things and is prepared to pay a certain cost to get them. This doesn't mean that she came on this trip to find those things, but when she sees the opportunity to get them, she takes it.

In terms of Teddy, we have to wait until a little later in the play for an incident that gives us a clue to him and why he seems to accept Ruth's decision. In his case, though, it is a symbolic incident: the moment at which he accepts the photograph of his grandfather, Max's father. This incident could be interpreted in at least one of two ways.

Max's father was described as a good and loving father. On the one hand, Teddy's acceptance of the photograph might suggest that his role in the family is to escape from all the nastiness he was born into, go back home without the woman who has joined with the nastiness, be a loving father himself, and help his children break the pattern of nastiness. On the other hand, his acceptance could be a reminder that it doesn't matter whether someone is a good father; nastiness like Max's and the others will emerge and conquer.

The likelihood of the truth of the second possibility increases when we take into account Sam's revelation and subsequent collapse. When he shouts what we take to be the truth about MacGregor and Jessie, which was foreshadowed earlier in the play when he referred to "other people," it represents the final collapse of the idealism of the family and their illusions about Jessie's saintliness. Further, because Sam represents goodness and integrity throughout the play and therefore represents the goodness of his and Max's father as well as Teddy's goodness, his subsequent collapse suggests that the goodness in the family is collapsing; it implies that Teddy's hopes for escaping the family nastiness are collapsing as well, and that he has, in effect, no hope. This, in turn, is another illustration of the play's theme - that it is impossible to escape the cycle of violence.

In the final moments of the play, after Teddy leaves, we see how the balance of power has shifted so that Ruth is now completely in control. We see how she's shaped the situation so that the men compete for her attentions and affections, which leads to Max's collapse. We see how pathetic, lonely and desperate he really is, which suggests to us that his nastiness is really a mask, a coping mechanism to not only deal with the world and his three sons but also his grief at the loss of his beloved wife.

With these final moments, we see clearly that violence has again bred violence. Just because Ruth doesn't deal in direct physical violence doesn't mean her manipulations, her setting up the men in competition with each other, and her humiliation of Max, aren't violent acts. They are, though they are of a much subtler kind. In the final tableau, the thematic circle is complete.

Bibliography

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Characters

Jessie

Jessie is Max's late wife and the mother of Teddy, Lenny, and Joey Though she never appears in the play, she is mentioned frequently and her presence is felt throughout. She is praised by Max in saintly terms as being "the backbone of the family" and also condemned by him as a "slutbitch." She had a close relationship with Max's friend MacGregor.

Joey

Joey is a rather stupid man in his mid-twenties and the youngest of the three sons. He wants to be a professional boxer and to that end works out in a gym. His regular job is as a demolition laborer. Joey is delighted when he sees Ruth and Lenny dancing and kissing and immediately takes Ruth to the sofa where he begins to "make love" to her. Later, he spends two hours with Ruth alone in ills room but does not "get all the way," and he seems content with that. At the end of the play, Joey sits at Ruth's feet like a child, with her stroking his head like a pet.

Lenny

Lenny is in his early thirties and is the second son. He is a successful pimp with a string of prostitutes. Lenny is the first of the sons introduced in the play, and he seems to dominate the household with a cold, quick wit. He is also the first of the family to meet Ruth, and he immediately attempts to dominate her. He tells two long stories, one about being propositioned by a prostitute by the harbor front and the other about going to help an old lady; both end with his beating the women. Ironically, Lenny seems to be sexually as well as emotionally impotent; Ruth almost instinctively recognizes this and turns it against him. Lenny later suggests setting up Ruth as a prostitute so she can pay her own way while "staying with the family." At the end of the play, Lenny is standing to one side as Joey sits at Ruth's feet and Max crawls towards her begging for a kiss.

Mac

See MacGregor

MacGregor

MacGregor, now dead, was a ruffian friend of Max. Together they were "two of the worst hated men in the West End." Like Jessie, he never appears in the play but is often referred to and figures prominently in Max's memory. Metaphorically, MacGregor's ghost haunts Max because of Mac's "close relationship" with Max's wife Jessie.

Max

Max is the seventy-year-old father of the household. He is a shrewd, crude, brutish retired butcher. He attempts to maintain household dominance with threats and the evidence of his past as a hard-working man who supported his wife and sons. He also invokes his past reputation as a violent thug who was feared by everyone. His initial confrontation with Lenny at the beginning of the play ends with the father backing down from his threats. He later physically assaults both his son Joey and his brother Sam. Although he is viciously insulting upon first meeting Ruth, calling her a "smelly scrubber" and a "pox-ridden slut," he later speaks of her in sentimentally glowing terms. He is astute enough to recognize, near the end of the play, that it is Ruth who will "make use of us," rather than the other way around.

Ruth

Ruth is Teddy's wife and the mother of their three boys. She is the agent for change in the power struggle of the all-male household. Her marriage is apparently rocky at best. When she first appears in the second scene of the play, she immediately displays her independence. She uses semantic quibbles to undermine her husband's authority. It is nearly midnight and although she says she is tired and asks if she can sit, when Teddy tells her to sit she refuses to do so. When he suggests they go to bed she decides to go for a walk. Throughout the play she is able to take control from each of the men, beginning with a wonderfully understated theatrical scene with Lenny. She charms Sam and uses sex to dominate Joey. When the family suggests that she stay with them and help pay her way by spending a couple of hours a night in a West End flat, she knows immediately what they are proposing. She treats the offer purely as a business proposition and proves a tough negotiator. The men agree to all of her demands, and she agrees that it is a very attractive idea. At the end of the play she has chosen to stay with the family.

Sam

Sam is Max's brother and co-owner of the house. He works as a chauffeur for a car rental service. Sam is the only one who does not attempt to control Ruth. He seems to be a gentle, sensitive, and even gallant man. He is gracious with Ruth, and he tries to console Teddy by telling him that he was always his mother's favorite. There are many indications that he is not interested in sex at all, something that is used against him by Max. However, Sam has survived in this household; in his own quiet way, he is tough Near the end of the play he attempts to undermine Max by blurting out what everyone has always suspected, that MacGregor had Jessie in the back seat of his cab and thus may be the father of at least one of the boys

Teddy

Teddy, in his mid-thirties and the eldest son, is a Ph.D. who teaches philosophy at a university in America. He married Ruth just before leaving for America SIX years before the play begins. He has never told his family he was married, and, as the play begins, he is bringing Ruth home to meet them for the first time. It is soon obvious that the marriage is a dry and loveless one. Teddy is able to see what is happening in the dynamics between Ruth and the men of his family, but he is either unable or unwilling to put a stop to it. He has narrowed his intellectual focus in order to objectify others in an apparent attempt to avoid emotional involvement and thus to protect himself from pain. He says that he can see what others do, that it is the same things that he does, but that he won't be involved in it. He relates the family's proposition to Ruth and does not try to dissuade her when she accepts it. He says that he and their boys can manage until she comes back to America.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

A family lives in the same house and though they live side-by-side physically, their emotional alienation and consequent loneliness is palpable. Perhaps the most alienated of all the characters are Teddy and Ruth They seem to have *chosen* to remain emotionally separate from the others. Teddy very clearly states this when talking about his "Critical works." He says that it is a question of how far one can operate *on* things and not *in* things. He has chosen not to be emotionally involved with anyone and apparently has chosen to specialize in a very arcane branch of philosophy in order to maintain what he calls his "intellectual equilibrium"; more likely this field allows him to work with little contact with others. Teddy says his relatives are just objects and, "You just. . move about. I can observe it. I can see what you do. It's the same as I do. But you're lost in it. You won't get me being. . . . I won't be lost in it " Teddy displays a near complete apathy to the events that unfold during his visit. Despite losing his wife to his father and brothers (not to mention a life of prostitution), despite watching his uncle collapse in front of him, he remains passionless and isolated from an emotional tie to these events.

Ruth also chooses to treat others as "objects" to be controlled. She agrees to work as a prostitute, which by nature requires a lack of emotional involvement, and at the same time she agrees to "take on" the men of the family. She shows no hesitation or sense of loss when she chooses not to return to her three sons and her home in America. She even calls Teddy "Eddy" when telling him not to become a stranger as he leaves for America.

Anger and Hatred

Anger abounds in *The Homecoming.* The play opens with Max looking for scissors and Lenny ignoring him. Lenny then responds with, "Why don't you shut up, you daft prat?" Throughout the first scene, as the family of men are introduced, anger and hatred seem to be the main traits of their relationships and their preferred modes of conduct

Lenny calls Max a "stupid sod," and Max responds with, "Listen! I'll chop your spine off, you talk to me like that!" Even when talking about the past, Max recalls that he and his late friend Mac (MacGregor) were two of the "worst hated men in the West End"; even something like nostalgia, which is typically happy and fond, is tainted with loathing.

None of the relationships in the play are warm and caring. When Max's brother Sam comes home from work, Max taunts him, and the seemingly gentle Sam retorts with innuendoes about Max's late wife Jessie and his friend Mac-a sore spot that has Obviously been picked at many times before. In fact, the smoldering anger over the suspicion of what took place between Jessie and Mac is a weapon often used against

Max by both Sam and Lenny. When Joey, Max's dullard younger son, returns home from the gym, Max turns on him and belittles his dreams of becoming a professional boxer. Joey is too slow witted to respond and simply retreats from the room The attempt to escape from this seething anger and vicious attacks was probably what drove Teddy to retreat into a narrow intellectual discipline, to marry without telling his family, and to move to America.

Appearance and Reality

Although there are flare ups of anger and even violence, most of the brutality in *The Homecoming* is covered with a seemingly sophisticated veneer. When the actual physical violence does erupt, it seems comic. Lenny's stories about the tart down by the harbor and the old woman that he beat up are told in an almost off-hand way. The violence is contained in the subtext, the threat of violence to Ruth or any woman for whom Lenny takes a disliking. Ruth also behaves with outward decorum which belies her inner fire and sexuality.

Act II starts out with the whole family having after-dinner coffee and cigars. They exchange pleasantries about the meal, the coffee, and family chat about how proud Jessie would be of her fine sons and how much she would like to see her grandchildren it seems to be a warm family gathering. Seething beneath the surface, however, is a violent dominance game in which there is a constant fight for control of the family. One of the rules of the family seems to be that when a blow is delivered the one who is attacked must not show his hurt. Even after Ruth has decided to stay and become a prostitute, Teddy's leave taking is comically conventional. He tells Max how good it has been to see him, there is advice on how best to get to the airport, and Max gives him a picture of himself to show the grandchildren. This surface conventionality helps to make the emotionally violent reality stand out as even more grotesque.

Doubt and Ambiguity

Pinter's plays are filled with ambiguity. He does not spell things out clearly and the viewer must often construct the past out of small hints, which mayor may not be true. Lenny's stones about beating up women may be true or he may be lying to bolster his Image as a tough pimp. It Isn't revealed where in America Teddy teaches or if he truly does have teaching post. It Isn't clear what Ruth means when she tells Lenny she had been a "model for the body." There's further doubt regarding Sam's sexuality, Joey's boxing career, and Max's younger days (though it is revealed that he and Mac were something of a fearsome pair).

Perhaps most striking is the dichotomy in Mac's recollections of his wife, Jessie (he refers to her as both a "slutbitch" and as a warm, giving mother and wife). It is unclear which of his recollections best summarized his wife-or if they are both accurate. When Sam says that he knows that Mac and Jessie had had sexual relations, he immediately collapses with an apparent heart attack or stroke and yet no one pays any attention to what, again, mayor may not be the truth. Part of what Pinter is saying is that life itself is mostly ambiguous and that people must often navigate their lives without satisfactory knowledge or guidance; the truth may set you free but good luck finding it.

Language and Meaning

Language in *The Homecoming* is used by the characters to attain tactical advantage. The language is seemingly a very accurate reproduction of normal speech. However, it is very carefully selected and, while still seeming "realistic," it reflects the fact that people think at different speeds, use language to evade confrontation, and think and speak in metaphors. Frequently people seem to misunderstand one another when they actually don't want to understand or to be seen to understand. Language, in Pinter's hands, is a weapon. Put into the mouths of characters like Lenny and Max, it seeks to hurt others. By belittling and verbally abusing the other characters, Lenny and Max can keep them off guard, control them. While this has been an effective tool in the past, the presence of Ruth upsets the balance. Not only can she match or better the men's verbal skills, she has nonverbal sexual skills which she uses to ultimately gain the upper hand.

Morals and Morality

One of the things that bothered some critics about *The Homecoming* is the complete lack of a moral framework Although none of the characters seems to have any moral scruples at all, Pinter does not condemn any of them. That is part of the viewer's astonishment at Ruth's deciding to stay and "service" the family whIle also working as a prostitute. Equally astonishing is the calm with which Teddy accepts her decision. Pinter includes no hint of his personal feelings toward these characters actions. Their fates are stated objectively; it is up to the audience to decide what is moral and what is not.

Politics

At the time *The Homecoming* was written, many young British playwrights were writing plays with overt political messages. While Pinter addresses no political system in his play, *The Homecoming* does deal with politics: the psychic politics of the family and of the sexes. This play very powerfully shows these dynamics at work. By extension the audience is able to relate these politics to the wider arenas of organizations and even states. A viewer can easily extrapolate the relationship between Max and !us sons to that between a politician and his constituents. Ruth's ascension to family dominance is, likewise, similar to a rebel force arriving in a capital and toppling the old regime in a coup.

Sex

The Homecoming is rife with sex, although none of it seems to have anything to do with love and little has to do with lust or pleasure. In most cases, sex in the play is another weapon used for gaining control. Jessie, the mother of Teddy, Lenny, and Joey, is viewed both as a nurturing figure and as a whore, a role that Ruth overtly takes over at the end of the play. Jessie's sexual relations with Max's friend MacGregor is a theme that is alluded to frequently throughout the play.

Ruth blatantly uses sex and Lenny's apparent fear of sex in order to dominate him in their first encounter. Later she again uses sex to dominate Lenny while they dance. Immediately after that she begins foreplay with Joey in full view of the rest of the family, including her husband. Later she spends two hours in Joey's room leading him on without "going all the way," and he is enthralled with her. She agrees to be a prostitute as a business proposition. Teddy seems to accept her sexual activity as somehow separate from her role as mother in their family of boys. Even Sam's lack of sexual interest is used as a weapon against him. When Joey and Lenny relate a story of their sexual escapade with two girls, it is really a story about having the power to frighten away the girls' escorts and then to have the girls in the rubble of a demolition site. Sex for these people is a matter of power and domination.

Sex Roles

Max has become the "mother" of the household in charge of the cooking. The men see women as objects to be dominated and to use for sexual gratification. Lenny runs a string of prostitutes; upon first meeting Ruth, Max assumes she is a prostitute; when Joey sees her dancing and brushing lips with Lenny in Act II, he exclaims, "She's a tart. Old Lenny's got a tart in here.. .. Just up my street!" Ruth is also the mother of three boys, as was Jessie. Part of what Pinter is dealing with, and part of what some members of the audience find astonishing and upsetting, is the fact that Ruth encompasses both of the stereotypical polar extremes assigned to women by men: Madonna and whore.

Sexism

The whole family of men assumes that women are there to be used. Teddy sees Ruth as a mother and helpmate. Max and Lenny immediately assume she is a whore. Moreover, Max attempts to lower the other men, attacking their maleness by calling them "bitches" or other derogatory terms usually used to refer to women. Ruth, too, uses sexism to emasculate Lenny. After toying with Joey she abruptly stands and demands a drink: when Lenny asks if she wants it on the rocks, she says, "Rocks? What do you know about rocks?" Her double entendre is not lost on Lenny. In fact, the whole play can be read as an attempt to keep women "in their place," and the victorious revolt against that effort by Ruth She takes complete control. She escapes from a dead, arid marriage, and she takes control of the business negotiations and demands a contract based on firm economic principles. She will use her body as she sees fit in order to gain what she wants and without any concern for what others, including her husband, think. As Pinter said in a conversation with Mel Gussow of the *New York*

Times, "Ruth in *The Homecoming-no* one can tell her what to do. She is the nearest to a free woman that I've ever written-a free and independent mind."

Style

Setting

The setting of *The Homecoming* is realistic. It consists of a large room with a window, an archway upstage where a wall has been removed, stairs up to a second floor, a door leading to outside and a hallway leading to interior rooms. The furnishings, too, are realistic: two armchairs, a large sofa, sideboard with a mirror above it, and various other chairs and small tables. The set stays the same throughout.

Plot

The play takes place over a period of approximately twenty hours and there is one basic plot with no subplots. Here are all the requisite unities of time, place, and action that Aristotle put forth as the ideals for constructing a tight, powerful drama.

Why, then, were audiences, including many critics, disturbed not only by the content but also by the form of the play? Part of the answer is in the audience's expectation that they will somehow be told about the characters in clear-cut exposition. In the realistic tradition-still overwhelmingly predominant in 1965-audiences expected to be informed of character background which would lead them to accept as ultimately logical and reasonable the responses of the characters at the point of climax and the falling action.

Viewers also expect the play to advance to its resolution in a logical cause-and-effect progression In *The Homecoming* the exposition is slight and not always reliable because characters frequent1y constructs fictitious pasts in order to gain advantage in the present, as Lenny does when telling stories about brutalizing women when seeking to dominate Ruth at their first meeting. And, at first glance, most audiences are shocked and stunned when Ruth decides to abandon her husband and three sons to work as a prostitute and "service" the rest of the family. The denouement consists of Teddy departing for the airport and Ruth sitting in a chair with Joey at her feet, Max crawling and begging for a kiss, and Lenny in the background looking on. There is no further explanation for the action The logical progression is there, but it is not blatantly put forth and explained as it would be in a realistic play such as Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House.* The audience is left to sift the action for clues as to how this outcome could possibly make sense.

Language

Another of the disturbing elements of Pinter's plays is his use of language Pinter's characters speak with the all the hesitations, evasions, and non sequiturs of everyday speech. Moreover, the characters do not respond to questions with obviously logical answers, as would happen in a "realistic" play. Pinter's characters do not use language to communicate directly and logically; they use language to attack, defend, and stall while seeking out the motive rather than the direct meaning of the question.

Language for Pinter is never divorced from tactical maneuvering. He very carefully catches the rhythms of thought and language, and he structures these rhythms partly through his use of pauses and silences written into the script. These rhythms are also integral to the situation and relationships. While a great deal has been written about the use of these devices, they are not really mysterious to the astute actor: they are part of the thought processes. Pinter put it very succinctly in his conversation with Gussow when he said, "The pause is a pause because of what has just happened in the minds and guts of the characters. They spring out of the text

They're not formal conveniences or stresses but part of the body of the action. . . . And a silence equally means that something has happened to create the impossibility of anyone speaking for a certain amount of time-until they can recover from whatever happened before the silence." Nevertheless, to an audience used to hearing rationally logical conversations in plays of the realistic style, the more elusive-and more "real"-dialogue of Pinter's plays caused confusion.

Action

The answer to the problem of dramatic irony is that the audience must tune in to the action that is taking place on the sub textual level. Pinter's characters may seem to know more about what is going on than the audience because those characters are constantly involved in a battle for dominance or at the very least survival in the savage world in which they live. Even though on the surface the dialogue may seem to be about a sandwich or an ashtray or a glass of water, the characters are fully aware that the real action is about leverage, a battle Which they can ill afford to lose For Pinter, the shifting of an ashtray or the drinking of a glass of water is a large theatrical gesture. The characters know that, and the audience comes to recognize it as well

Historical Context

While *The Homecoming* is grounded in the specifics of setting and family relationships, there is very little reference to the world at large. Nevertheless, the strife within the play's family reflects a turbulent time in the world in the year of its debut, 1965. The United States was being sucked deeper and deeper into the war in Vietnam. U.S. bombers pounded North Vietnam in February of 1965, and on March 8, U.S. Marines landed at Da Nang in the first deployment of US.combat troops in Vietnam.

On June 28 the first full-scale combat offensive by U.S. troops began.

America in 1965 reflected the turmoil of the military escalation. Anti-war rallies were held in four American cities and the term "flower power" was introduced by poet Allen Ginsberg to describe nonviolent protest. The Hell's Angels motorcycle gang attacked marchers calling them "un-American." University enrollments swelled as young Americans took advantage of draft deferrals for college students to escape the expanding war in Vietnam and campuses were tense with unrest. Still more young men evaded the draft outright, fleeing to Canada to escape combat duty.

Civil rights activist Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965, in the Harlem area of New York City. The Voting Rights Act became law on August 10, and federal examiners began registering black voters in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. In Alabama, civil rights marchers were attacked by Alabama state police Using tear gas, whips, nightsticks, and dogs. President Lyndon Johnson sent three thousand National Guardsman and military police to protect the civil rights marchers. In Chicago, police arrested 526 anti-segregation demonstrators in June. The Watts section of Los Angeles had violent race riots beginning August 12. Over ten thousand blacks burned and looted an area of five hundred square blocks and destroyed an estimated forty million dollars worth of property. Fifteen thousand police and National Guardsmen were called in, thirty-four people were killed and nearly four thousand arrested. More than two hundred businesses were totally destroyed

In other parts of the world, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) unilaterally declared independence from Britain. London called the declaration illegal and treasonable and declared economic sanctions against the country. There were demonstrations outside Rhodesia House in London. Despot Nicolae Ceausescu succeeded as head of state in Romania, where he would rule until 1989. There was a coup in the Independent Congo Republic and General Joseph Mobuto made himself president and proceeded to rule as dictator.

Despite such strife (and perhaps because of it), the United States was in a period of economic growth and prosperity during the mid-1960s. In his State of the Union speech, President Johnson outlined programs for a "Great Society" that he hoped would eliminate poverty in America. Across the Atlantic things were less rosy, as Britain froze wages, salaries, and prices in an effort to check inflation in that country.

The Federal Aid to the Arts Act was signed by President Johnson in September, 1965. This established the National Endowment for the Arts and the Humanities The United States was the last of the industrialized societies to provide direct aid to the arts. In New York City, the Vivian Beaumont Theatre opened in Lincoln Center. Pop Art, as exemplified by Andy Warhol's Campbell's Tomato Soup Can painting, and "Op" art became fashionable. The Rolling Stones gained huge success with their song" (I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." The Grateful Dead had its beginnings with "acid-rock" in San Francisco. The mini-skirt appeared in London. The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre declared itself a "club theatre" in order to evade preproduction censorship for the production of playwright Edward Bond's *Saved,* which deals with moral malaise and violence in working-class London. Off- off-Broadway theatres, founded as an alternative to commercial theatre, were growing in number and showing themselves willing to fight for freedom of speech and artistic expression.

In Hackney, a working-class neighborhood in North London just beyond the boundaries of the Cockney area of the East End, life continued much as it had for generations. In an unpublished autobiographical memoir quoted by Michael Billington in *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter,* Pinter vividly describes the Hackney of his youth: "it brimmed over with milk bars, Italian cafes, Fifty Shilling tailors and barber shops. Prams and busy ramshackle stalls clogged up the main street-street violinists, trumpeters, match sellers. Many Jews lived in the district, noisy but candid; mostly taxi drivers and pressers, machinists and cutters who steamed all day in their workshop ovens. Up the hill lived the richer, the "better-class" Jews, strutting with their mink-coats and American suits and ties. Bookmakers, jewelers and furriers with gown shops in Great Portland Street."

Critical Overview

When *The Homecoming* opened in London on June 3, 1965, Harold Pinter was already considered a major playwright in England, and ills new play was eagerly awaited. Harold Hobson, critic for the *Sunday Times,* who alone had championed Pinter's debut *The Room* and his 1958 *The Birthday Party,* had said then that "Mr. Pinter. . . possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London," and he predicted then that Pinter would make ills mark in theatre. The great success of *The Caretaker* in 1960, radio plays such as *A Slight Ache,* and short stage and television plays had fulfilled Hobson's predictions, and the word "Pinteresque" had already been coined to denote the playwright's style.

The Homecoming is a deeply disturbing play and the critics' reception reflected the drama's turmoil. B. A. Young of the *Financial Times* called the play "stark and humble" but also said that it is "monstrously effective theatre." Although Young did not think Pinter to be an *important* playwright, he pointed out that "he has this enormous capacity for generating tension among ills characters in which the audience becomes irresistibly involved." Bernard Levin in the *Daily Mail,* while crediting Pinter's "dazzling dramatic legerdemain," was negative and saw no point to the play. Philip Hope-Wallace of the *Guardian* objected strongly (and longly) about the lack of dramatic irony-in which the audience knows more than the characters on stage and the fact that it was the actors (characters?) who seemed to know more than the audience. The critic seemed to be completely baffled by the play and said that it "leaves us feeling cheated."

Hobson wrote in the *Sunday Times* that he liked the play but was deeply disturbed by the lack of a moral stand by the author, saying "I am troubled by the complete absence from the play of any moral comment whatsoever. To make such a comment does not necessitate the author's being conventional or religious; it does necessitate, however, his having made up his mind about life." Penelope Gilliatt in the *Observer* called the opening of *The Homecoming* "an exultant night. . . it offered the stirring spectacle of a man in total command of his talent."

British audiences responded positively and the play had an eighteen-month run at the Aldwych Theatre in London before moving to New York on January 3, 1967, after a brief pre-Broadway run in Boston. It also quickly had other productions around the world: Paris, Berlin, Geneva, Gothenburg, Munich, Bremerhaven, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Stockholm, and Sydney, Australia.

The Broadway reviews were mixed but predominantly positive. Norman Nadel in the *World Journal Tribune* called it a "nightmare play" and a "fascinating but unfathomable comedy" and thought it would appeal only to more adventurous theatergoers. Martin Gottfried, the powerful critic of *Women's Wear Daily,* found it "a fascinating and bizarre comedy" that "is so deep-veined with implication and so consistently provocative, controlling and comic that it not only demands respect but, more important, it wins attention and thought. The play□ carries theatre life and with it the workings of a probing and creative mind." John Chapman of the *Daily News* did not like the play and, while he said that Pinter created interesting characters, comedy, and suspense, the playwright lacked the important ingredient needed to be an important dramatist- "good taste" The most devastating review came from Walter Kerr of the *New York Times,* who said that *The Homecoming* consists of "a single situation that the author refuses to dramatize until he has dragged us all, aching, through a half-drugged dream." He did find the final twenty minutes of the play to be interesting as Pinter "broke apart our preconditioned expectations to the situations" and "the erratic energies onstage display their own naked authority by forcing us to accept the unpredictable as though it were the natural shape of things" The general message from Kerr, however, was that the play dragged and needed "a second situation" to give it life.

The Homecoming managed to overcome the negative aspects of the reviews, went on to a long run, and established Pinter on Broadway. It won the Drama Critics' Circle Award, a Tony Award, and the Whitbread Anglo-American Theatre Award as best play of the year. It has been produced throughout the world and continues to achieve both critical and popular success in major revivals, such as that at the Royal National Theatre, London, in 1997. Pinter continues to be one of the most written-about playwrights working today, and *The Homecoming* is by general consensus held to be one of his most important works-by many accounts ills masterpiece.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Browne is a noted drama authority. In this essay he discusses the power of Pinter's language as action and weapon.

Harold Pinter has stated unequivocally many times that "I do not write theses: I Write plays." He says that his personal judgments are reserved for the "shape and validity" of his work. He is concerned with expressing his vision in a way that communicates *directly* to the audience. Audiences in 1965 (and to a large degree even today) were used to realism with its specific biographical facts, implicit or explicit judgments on characters and situations, summary speeches, and neatly wrapped denouement. The audience may then agree or disagree with the author's view or conclusions, but at least the author's stance was clearly delineated. That is not so with Pinter, and this is profoundly disturbing to many critics and viewers. Pinter banishes the notion of the omniscient, moral author and makes no judgements about his characters or their situations. The characters are defined by their actions rather than judged by their author. This technique puts the perception-and moral judgement-of these characters squarely in the hands of the audience.

Like many plays *The Homecoming* presents us with a solidly realistic grounding in a particular place. There is an almost uncanny reproduction of real life in the characters' language. The story is simple: a man brings his wife of six years home to meet his family for the first time. There is a struggle for control of the family in which the new wile is first the target of domination and ultimately the victor. In this battle for supremacy, the character resort to their basest instincts for survival, casting most accoutrements of civility aside. While these people reveal themselves as vicious creatures, little information is given as to what specific events in their lives made them this way. This ambiguity in their backgrounds, especially Ruth's, adds to both the allure and repulsive nature of Pinter's characters While the play is grounded in a specific reality, it also provides a sense of mystery that lends itself to many valid interpretations *The Homecoming* offers its audiences a powerful glimpse into the darkness of human nature but it also leaves character motivation and history open to interpretation.

Most of the "action" in *The Homecoming* is contained in the language and works on a psychological level Language for Pinter is never devoid of tactical purpose. His characters do not speak in a logical question-response manner; they constantly probe the other's assumed intentions, cover-up their own intentions, counter-strike, and intentionally evade. They are constantly using language to create a reality in which they can dominate the others. This leads to very powerful and constant action on the sub textual level. Ruth may seem to be talking about a glass of water when she says to Lenny, "Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass. . . . sit on my lap. Take a long cool sip. . . . Put your head back and open your mouth," but Lenny and the audience know that she is making an overt sexual proposal. Did Ruth have a Job in her past that equipped her to deal with men on this level, or did she acquire this skill from her six years with Teddy? Another puzzle for the viewer. In another instance, Sam seems to be gently praising Jessie when he tells Max that he would "Never get a bride like you had, anyway. Nothing like your bride. . . going about these days. Like Jessie." In reality he is reminding Max that Jessie was, at best, a loose woman who had an affair with Max's best friend MacGregor And Max understands the real meaning in Sam's words.

Despite their ambiguous histories, Pinter creates wonderful characters. In fact, he has been "accused" by some critics of merely writing characters that actors like to play, as though that were a fault in his writing. He does Write fascinating characters. Max is a gem of contradictions: sly, clever, charming, vicious, violent, and ultimately vulnerable and pitiful. Ruth is sexually seething beneath her cool, polite exterior. Lenny is all cool polish and wit over his inner fears and weaknesses. Even gentle Sam has the weapons that have allowed him to survive in this savage household. These are luminous, multifaceted characters. the kind that actors define as "meaty" and crave for their challenging nature, They are always active and they always have the capacity to surprise us. And despite their often revolting behavior, these are characters that an audience seeks out as well. They offer a vicarious ride into humanity's lower depths and a tangible mystery of human nature.

Moreover. Pinter is able to make us laugh at the brutish behavior of his characters. As Harold Clurman put it in his review of *The Homecoming* in the *Nation:* 'The mask is one of horror subdued in glacial irony." We are constantly surprised by the incongruity between what we expect in these family relationships and what is actually expressed. The brutality and crudity of feeling that break through the veneer of civility constantly surprises us. For example, the opening scene of Act n might come from a "drawing room" comedy-those polite, witty staples of British theatre for decades before Pinter. In *The Homecoming* the family is having after-dinner coffee and the chit-chat about family life and Max's late wife, Jessie, is quickly recognized as hypocritical sentimentality to the point of parody.

So, too, the first psycho-sexual duel between Ruth and Lenny has the power to provoke laughter as we watch Lenny nonchalantly weave his stories of violence to women in order to intimidate and dominate Ruth, only to have Ruth turn the tables on him with sexual innuendo. She easily demolishes Lenny, and we delight in seeing him calling after her, "Is that supposed to be some kind of proposal?" as she climbs the stairs totally victorious. Even the overtly physical violence seems almost like slapstick comedy. When Max knocks Joey, the aspiring boxer, to the floor with one punch, then hits Sam, and finally collapses himself, it is, on the surface at least, funny. When Sam collapses from an apparent stroke after blurting out that "Mac had Jessie in the backseat of my cab as I drove them along," it is funny because of the reaction of Max, who says, "What's he done? Dropped dead?_ . . A corpse on my floor? Get him out of here." In her comical nonchalance, Ruth seems not even to have noticed.

Pinter's humor is often categorized as black humor for its ability to draw laughter out of what are commonly regarded as serious events or situations. Much of this dark comedy is drawn from actual events in Pinter's life The basic idea for *The Homecoming* comes from the fact that one of ills boyhood friends, Morris Wernick, did in fact marry without telling ills family and immediately moved to Canada. He kept up the pretense of being unmarried for ten years before taking his whole family to meet his father. His father provided the inspiration for Max, and Wernick also had an uncle who was a cab driver-much like Sam in the play. All this means that the basic situation, which served as a springboard for Pinter's imagination, is grounded solidly in reality. Nevertheless, Michael Billington in his study of early drafts of the play discovered that the play grows from the image of a man and a woman who are in discord. From that start, Pinter seems to be able to tap directly into his subconscious. He draws on his own obsessions and inner tensions, and he has the ability to make those inner dreams concrete on the stage.

In spite of the fact that Pinter does not consciously write to illustrate a theme, his plays do communicate, and communicate directly, to an audience. Part of the power of *The Homecoming* is the fact that, like all potent drama, the play does lend itself to many interpretations.

The play has been held to be a very particular Jewish domestic drama-a view that Pinter is quick to dispel by pointing out that audiences from Italy to Japan respond to it. It could also be seen as a simple study of the loss of human sensitivity, of emotional impotence in which all human warmth has been smothered Certainly the play shows life to be a ceaseless struggle in which language is used as a negotiating weapon to attack or cover-up and defend. In this view, all the characters are doomed to isolation and profound loneliness. It has even been suggested that the whole thing is a hoax perpetrated by Teddy. In this view, Teddy has hired a prostitute and orchestrated the whole thing to wreak revenge on his cruel family.

Martin Esslin builds a solid case for an Oedipal interpretation of *The Homecoming* in which Ruth, taking on the dual roles of Madonna and whore, is the object of the sons' lust as well as an avenging angel who dethrones and utterly humiliates the father. Another interpretation of the Oedipus myth that fits the play is the ritual sacrificing of the old king, Max, so that there may be rejuvenation of the social body. Unlike the myth, however, anew king does not rise from the ranks of young men to assume the throne; the heir apparent Lenny is denied his ascension. From almost all perspectives, the new "king" is Ruth.

In his book *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter,* Billington, while appreciating other views, finds *The Homecoming* to be "less that of Oedipal wish-fulfillment than of female triumph over a male-power structure." There is no doubt in my mind that Ruth does triumph. From her introduction she makes it clear that she will not act just because others tell her to do so; she makes her own decisions for very specific reasons. Ruth shows a distinct talent for bending the men to her will. And she is able to tailor her interaction with them to best manipulate their individual personalities.

When Lenny refuses to accept that she is in fact married to Teddy and attempts to intimidate her with stories of his brutality towards women, she is unmoved. When he tries to physically threaten her by repeatedly moving her ashtray and attempting to take a waterglass from her, she turns the tables on him by using the glass of water as a metaphor for sex. She defuses Max by calmly *not* responding to ills taunts of "pox-ridden slut" and "whore." She is genteel to Sam, and she openly seduces Joey. She takes control of the negotiations concerning the conditions under which she will work as a prostitute, and she drives a hard bargain. She ends up enthroned in an armchair, probably Max's, with the men around her like tamed animals. Joey is at her feet like a puppy, Max is crawling towards her begging for a kiss, Sam lies comatose on the floor, and Lenny is sulkily standing off to the side, denied his chance to rule. Ruth is queen of tills jungle.

Source: Terry Browne, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Gee reviews a 1997 London production of Pinter's play. Praising both the text and the new performance, the critic contends that thirty-two years after its debut, the play "still has the power to shock. "

A beautiful, elegant woman, Ruth, sprawls on a sofa in a drab working-class front room which contains five men: her husband, Teddy, her husband's two brothers, her elderly father-in-law and his brother. Her husband's youngest brother, Joey, lies heavily on top of her, grinding his pelvis into her in a simulation of intercourse, while the other brother caresses her hair and the two older men watch, transfixed. Soon her husband, who loves her, will stand by passively, as his family (whom she has only just met) concoct a scheme to set her up as a prostitute in the West End, servicing them at home in the evenings.

Thirty-two years after its London premiere in 1965, *The Homecoming,* in Roger Michell's intelligent new production, still has the power to shock. It drags out of the darkness the forbidden sexual desires of fathers for their sons' wives and brothers for their brothers', showing life in an all-male family as a cauldron of anger, competition, lust and loneliness, which boils over when a woman finally arrives. The superficially unlikely, even laughable, code of behaviour by which this particular family operates is also disturbing at a deep level, because the fantasies and drives underlying it are universally recognizable

Harold Pinter's best work draws deeply on the unconscious-he says he is aware of "Images, characters, insisting upon being written". This is not done showily, in the manner of Theatre of the Absurd; rather, everything is contained by an apparently neat and orderly reality which soon begins to fray at the edges. According to the playwright, "what happens in my plays could happen anywhere, at any time, in any place". Here, what happens is that the clever son, Teddy, returns home unexpectedly from America to introduce his wife to his family, in a mood of blind optimism-"They're very warm people, really" -and everything goes wrong. It is a family of men, for Teddy's mother, Jessie, alternately described as a paragon of motherhood and "slut-bitch" by the father, Max, is dead. In a sense, the whole play is about her absence, echoing the hinted absence of Max's own bedridden mother before her, and culminating in her transgressive replacement by a nubile daughter figure, Ruth

Max's father is an exaggeratedly sentimental, bullying patriarch, but Pinter makes Max unique by sharpening the familiar shifts between physical violence and demonstrative tenderness, anger and maudlin sorrow. David Bradley gives a riveting performance, transforming himself to terrifying effect at the end of the first act from apathetic old boaster into a man who can lay out brother and son almost simultaneously, commanding the otherwise silent theatre afterwards with a low growl and a gargoyle stare. But extremes, and quick movement between extremes, always make for comic possibility, since laughter is based on surprise, and the text of this dark and sinister play is full of comic moments which this excellent ensemble cast exploits to the full. There's some inventive witty language, too. Accused by his brother of not going the whole hog with Ruth, inarticulate Joey explains that sometimes you can be happy "without going any "og". When her husband finally leaves in disgust, Ruth manages the priceless "Don't become a stranger".

The Homecoming shows men and women deeply divided. The men are all dogs, a woman's worst nightmare of what men might be. Max growls like a dog; his son says they eat like dogs, they boast of having raped two women on a bomb-site like dogs, they sniff round Ruth and try to mount her like dogs. Pinter does not often write good parts for women *Old Times, Betrayal* and *A Kind of Alaska* are exceptions-and this play's only woman, Ruth, is a compendium of stereotypes from cool Madonna to promiscuous "tart". But she is also, as Teddy hints once or twice, "Ill"-mentally ill-which makes her behaviour just about plausible in realistic terms. Lindsay Duncan adds depth and mystery to this very difficult role, and at the end brings real pathos to the interesting gloss Michell's production puts on Pinter's text, introducing overtly maternal tenderness to Pinter's ambivalent image of reconciliation between men and women. The play is neither feminist nor misogynist, but turns instead on two contradictory truths about men who lack mothering-their brutalization and their child-like need for tenderness.

Source: Maggie Gee, review of *The Homecoming* in the *Times Literary Supplement,* Number 4896, January 31, 1997, p. 17.

Critical Essay #3

Carpenter discusses the nature of absurdity in Pinter's play, concluding that most critics ignore the work's true power in trying to penetrate the meaning of the playwright's absurdist touches.

Pinter's *Homecoming* may be the most enigmatic work of art since the Mona Lisa, an Image its main character, Ruth, evokes. At the turning point of the play, Ruth's professor-husband, Teddy, watches intently as she lies on the living-room couch wih one of his brothers while the other strokes her hair. His father, Max, claiming he is broadminded, calls her "a woman of quality," "a woman of feeling." Shortly after Ruth frees herself she asks Teddy, out of the blue: "Have your family read your Critical works?"

This provokes the smug Ph.D. to a slightly manic assertion: "To see, to be able to *see!* I'm the one who can see. That's why I can write my critical works. Might do you good, . . have a look at them . . . see how certain people can view . . . things. . . how certain people can maintain. . . intellectual equilibrium." His reaction to this intensely disconcerting moment parallels that of Pinter critics who, like Teddy, refuse to let themselves be "lost in it."

This is, of course, the natural reaction for people whose public image depends upon maintaining their intellectual equilibrium. But it is hardly the appropriate reaction either for Teddy, who restricts his protestations to eating his pimp-brother Lenny's cheese-roll, or for people genuinely experiencing a Pinter play.

Whatever else this response may involve, it must surely involve letting oneself be "lost in it." The jolt to one's intellectual equilibrium what Bert States has dubbed "the shock of nonrecognition" [see his essay "Pinter's *Homecoming* The Shock of Nonrecognition," *Hudson Review,* Autumn 1968]-must be acknowledged as a validly evoked response. The urge for rational illumination that so often follows-the nose-tickle crying for a sneeze-must be regarded as an integral second stage of that evoked response. In experiencing these repeated "Pinteresque" moments, we are put precisely in the dilemma of Camus's "absurd man" described in *The Myth of Sisyphus.* We are confronted with bewilderment, disruption, chaos, what Beckett referred to as "this buzzing confusion." In response, we involuntarily reach out for clarity, understanding, Godot: the little explanation that is not there. We become like Ionesco's Detective in *Victims of Duty,* who lays its underpinnings bare: "I don't believe in the absurd. Everything hangs together; everything can be com prehended . . thanks to the achievements of human thought and science." Camus's hero, the true believer in absurdity, acknowledges this recurring double take as a poignant byproduct of the absurd human condition, and in so doing, Camus says, reveals his "lucidity." Moreover, he becomes capable of reveling in the actual impact of the situation: the rich dark comedy of it, if you will. Sisyphus grows happy with his stone.

At these moments, in life or at a Pinter play, bizarre actions and reactions, churning with apparent meaning but inherently unexplainable, trigger the automatic desire for explanation built into us. An earlier pivotal incident in *The Homecoming* puts the idea in the form of a graphic enigma. Before her outright defection, Ruth invites her all-male audi ence to watch her as she moves her leg, but warns them that even though their minds may stray to the underwear that moves with it, all she is doing is moving her leg. She continues: "My lips move. Why don't you restrict. . . your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant . . . than the words which come through them." What do Ruth's words mean? Be strict phenomenologists! Pay no attention to the inadvertently moving underwear, on which I have taken pains to rivet your attention; consider what I am saying insignificant-though I have made it surge with significance. Her words are of course absurd, since they cancel themselves out logically. But can we resist taking the lure and, on impulse, groping for the significance so deviously implied? Only the dull or jaded could. What we can try to avoid, however, is blurring the moment by detaching ourselves from the play in a face-saving quest for comprehension.

Glance at a more flagrant example. Soon after Ruth meets Lenny in Act I, he abruptly asks her if he can hold her hand. She asks why, and he says, "I'll tell you why." He then spins an involved story about being approached under an arch by a lady whose chauffeur, a friend of the family, had tracked him down. Deciding she was "falling apart with the pox," he spurned her advances, "clumped her one," and stopped short of killing her only because of the inconvenience. "So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that." A baffling reason for wanting to hold Ruth's hand! If at this point we care more about recovering our intellectual aplomb than about letting the play carry us along in its inexorable absurd flow, we will wrench ourselves away from its grip on us; assume the pose of the Critic Detective; and forget that the scene, in spite of its spray of beckoning clues (partly because of them, in fact), will finally defy comprehension, and that the play, by its nature, is chuckling at our knee-jerk response to one of its more transparent brainteasers. In Camus's terms, the extent to which we avoid the role of public explainer and acknowledge the way the play has "caught" us becomes the genuine measure of our lucidity.

That avoidance and acknowledgement also give us a much better chance to enjoy the play-to relish the delectable, audacious absurdity of such moments. The distinctive power of *The Homecoming* derives largely from the bizarrely disconcerting quality of the things that happen to characters depicted as real people in the real world Think of what typical first-nighters probably tell their friends about the play: a professor visits his grubby home after several years abroad and brings his wife, about whom he has not even told his family. The repulsive father calls her a whore, and the two repulsive brothers treat her like one. She does not seem to mind, and after a little bargaining accepts a deal to stay on as the family pet. The husband stands by complacently, smirk on his face, and finally leaves. If these spectators get around to elaborating on the play, they probably recall more and more incidents that involve "absurd" actions and a dazzling variety of reactions: Ruth making Lenny "some kind of proposal" soon after she meets him; Max lurching from extreme to extreme in his treatment of Ruth; Joey emerging after two hours of "not going any hog" with Ruth upstairs; Lenny getting the bright idea of putting her "on the game" in a Greek Street flat and Ruth raising the ante extravagantly before accepting; everyone ignoring uncle Sam's traumatic revelation-and prone body-at the end. Untutored spectators are not apt to lose sight of what makes the play so eccentric and electric; as they reflect rather Idly on their experience, they are more than likely to keep focusing on those bizarre moments that amused, shocked, fascinated, and above all puzzled them.

But what can trained literary analysts do that "mere" playgoers cannot? Some will warp and deface this perspective; others will develop and refine it. Those who take the latter path may begin simply by noting more or less covert instances of bizarre behavior which have to be perceived to be appreciated: when Teddy chats with Lenny in scene one, for example, he does not mention the existence of Ruth (who has gone for a 1:00 a.m. stroll), and he goes to bed before Ruth returns, in effect leaving her to Lenny. An especially profitable avenue is open for critics with a penchant for close analysis: focus on details that lend themselves readily to facile interpretation, such as Max's stick or Lenny's comment to Teddy that his cigar has gone out, and demonstrate their immunity to interpretation.

Ruth's enigmatic farewell to her husband, "Eddie.. Don't become a stranger," is a manageable example. As Bernard Dukore notes, the fact that Ruth calls hIm Eddie suggests that "Teddy" is meant as a nickname not for Theodore but for Edward-a suggestion which invites comparisons to the similarly cuckolded stuffed shirt named Edward in *A SlightAche.* But she may also be symbolically withdrawing from him by muffing his name, or she may be knocking the "Theo"-the divinity--out of what is left of him, or she may be hinting he is no longer her teddy bear--or Teddy boy, for that matter. The rest of her statement, "Don't become a stranger," must be easier; the heavy odds are that she means the opposite of what she says Or, after all, does she still want to keep a line open to her own children, even though she now has a new set? Or is her pleasantry, as a scholar sitting beside me in the British Museum once assured me, the way a London prostitute says, "So long-come again" to her clients? Surely the play's obtrusive "homecoming" metaphor must be hiding in there somewhere. Or does Ruth mean, Teddy, don't make yourself becoming to a stranger! It must be more sensible to grant the incomprehensibility of such conundrums than to flail for "the solution" and thus flout their essential nature. In a play like this, we know-to a certain extent-that we cannot know.

A full-fledged analysis concentrating on the play's bizarre and disconcerting effects, or at least trying not to dissipate them, might well aim to project what Kelly Moms has deftly termed [in her essay' *'The Homecoming," Tulane Drama Review,* Winter 1966] "the suction of the absurd." As the play progresses, characters and audience alike get caught up in this suction. Take as a central example Lenny's victimization--or manhandling, if you prefer-by Ruth. In Act I she toys frivolously with him, countering his macho moves with audacities that throw him off kilter. From his lightly mocking "You must be connected with my brother in some way. . . . You sort of live with him over there, do you?" and his leering offer to relieve her of her drink, he is reduced by a little seductive bullying to shouting: "What was that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal?" No doubt he is conscious to some degree of having been manipulated, and alert spectators will have observed the Venus' fly trap in action, so that both he and the audience have a chance to shake off the disconcerting effect of Ruth's bizarre behavior.

Relief gets harder as the "suction" intensifies in Act II. When Teddy is present, Ruth joins Lenny in ruffling his proud feathers enough to convince him that he had better grab Ruth and flee If he is to avoid being "lost" in the situation After Lenny prompts him to absurd evasions of a few philosophical basics ("What do you make of all this business of being and not-being? "), Ruth calls attention to the elegant reality of her leg. Then she declares Teddy's adopted land full of rock, sand, space, and insects. Lenny may believe he has gained an ally, or even a potential filly for his stable, since he pretends to leave with Max and Joey but reappears the instant Teddy goes upstairs to pack. In sharp contrast to his first encounter with Ruth, this time he is low-keyed and conciliatory. Again he digresses about a lady, but he gave this one a flowery hat instead of "a short-arm jab to the belly." When Ruth reminisces dreamily about her life as a nude model (I assume) before she went off to America, Lenny seems to read her behavior as confirmation that she is making him "some kind of proposal."

Whether or not Lenny does, when Teddy comes downstairs to take Ruth home, he steps into the most bizarre auction scene in all domestic drama, and it is engineered by Lenny. The jaunty pimp puts on some jazz, asks Ruth for "just one dance" before she goes, receives full compliance, kisses her a few times, hands her over to Joey for a bit of mauling, parts them with a touch of his foot, and pours drinks for all to celebrate the realignment. Though it is Teddy who visibly strains against the pressure of absurdity at this moment, Lenny has actually set himself up for a subtle comic downfall. Ruth's siege of deep-felt nostalgia-not about "working" as any kind of sex object but about posing for photographers at a genteel country estate-was entirely introspective and self-directed. To put it graphically, Lenny may have gathered that she was showing him her underwear when she was really just moving her leg. By the time she responds to his advances, he is deceived into thinking he has her pegged and will endure no more tremors from her behavior He is thus a prime candidate for a shake-up.

Ruth administers the shake-up in two salvos, turning Lenny's cockiness as a shrewd exploiter of women into the sullen acquiescence of a man conned by one. It would be misleading to represent this as a conscious plot on her part, however; view it rather as the effect of her disturbing actions, whatever their roots. First, she somehow manages to play mother-beloved instead of whore to Joey, the test case client Lenny has arranged Lenny covers up his anxiety quite well when he learns this, but is clearly jolted by the realization that Ruth may be a mere tease. Joey snorts that he can be happy "Without going any hog," but what will the paying customers say? Second, Ruth responds to the idea of paying her way as a prostitute by making exorbitant demands that Lenny thought he could handle but cannot. He had said to the men' "I know these women. Once they get started they ruin your budget." Ruth reduces him to:

LENNY We'd supply everything. Everything you need. [Note the qualification-everything you *need*]
RUTH. I'd need an awful lot. Otherwise I wouldn't be content.

LENNY. You'd have everything.
[Qualification dropped]

Lenny does not squirm perceptibly during his public humiliation, even when it also becomes clear that Ruth will most probably refuse to "pull her weight" inside the house (no homecoming for Max and Lenny either). But as the final tableau implies, Ruth has effectively thrust him into the background shadows, big bear-enforcer Joey at her side. Whether Lenny becomes a cover-up-at-all-costs stoic or he is rendered catatonic as this barrage of the unmanageable shatters his delusion of firm control,

"he is certainly caught up in the "suction of the absurd"-no less than Teddy, in fact, and Teddy can at least escape. The audience, caught in the same suction (though with the cushion of aesthetic distance), leaves with heads buzzing: no escape but in the critics' explanations. Why Ruth carries out these strikingly unexpected acts of apparent self gratification, by the way, is a wide-open question, but her spate of nostalgia for the best moments of the old life may have served vaguely as the impetus. Or perhaps it was simply her way of thanking Teddy for offering her the opportunity to help him with his lectures when they return.

This brief essay does not pretend to be a fully developed interpretive argument about *The Homecoming.* It is meant to exemplify the direction that might be taken by Critical analysis which tries to be faithful to the genuine absurd experience of the play as it unfolds. The finely crafted progression of bizarre and disconcerting events might be approached from many other points of view. Mine, for example, completely neglects the two crucial offstage presences, Jessie and MacGregor, and fails to address Sam's important role. Nor does it do justice to one of the most prominent effects on that average firstnighter on whom I stake so much: the raunchy, ugly, gorgeous vulgarity of the piece. "What I mean," Lenny twits Teddy," .. you must know lots of professors, heads of departments, men like that.

They pop over here for a week at the Savoy, they need somewhere they can go to have a nice quiet poke. And of course you'd be in a position to give them inside information... . You could be our representative in the States." This excites Max: "Of course. We're talking in international terms" By the time we've finished Pan American'll give us a discount." There. I haven't neglected that.

It seems unfortunate as well as symptomatic that few critics in the past fifteen years have taken an approach that accepts and even relishes the absurdity of Pinter's depicted world. Precious few have resisted the urge to chase the will-other-wisp of a solution to the mind-bending indeterminacies *The Homecoming* in particular exudes. The gradual drift of criticism away from the reality of the play is marked by the actual titles of three early studies: the earliest, "Puzzling Pinter"

[Richard Schechner, *Tulane Drama Review,* Winter 1966]; the others, "A Clue to the Pinter Puzzle" [Arthur Ganz, *Educational Theatre Journal,* Vol. 21, 1969], and "Not So Puzzling Pinter" [Herbert Goldstone, *Theatre Annual,* Vol. 25,1969]. 10nesco's Detectives have been at work. What they have accomplished often seems dazzling in its perception and profundity. Some of it even seems inevitable when one is immersed in it But if it violates the inherent nature of the play by trying to defuse its stunningly absurd time bombs, then what it is doing is busily explaining away the chief source of the play's power and of its richly deserved stature.

Source: Charles A. Carpenter, "'Victims of Duty'? The Critics, Absurdity, and *'The Homecoming* '" in *Modem Drama,* Vol XXV, no 4, December, 1982, pp 489-95

Adaptations

The Homecoming was made into a film in 1973 for the American Film Theatre production series. It was directed by Sir Peter Hall and featured the original Royal Shakespeare Company cast: Vivian Merchant as Ruth, Michael Jayston as Teddy, Paul Rogers as Max, Cyril Cusack as Sam, Ian Holm as Lenny, and Terrence Rigby as Joey.

Topics for Further Study

Pinter believes that social violence is due to resentment. Research the break-up of the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia-Herzegovina), or other areas of late-twentieth century civil strife (such as Rwanda). Consider what part longstanding resentments played in the events. Compare them to the personal strife that occurs in Pinter's play.

Research the feminist movement of the 1960s and after. Does Ruth answer the feminist definition of a free woman? Or is she a man's (Pinter's) idea of a free woman?

"Subtext" is usually defined as "the action beneath the words," or as "the words *not* spoken." In *The Homecoming,* compare what is being talked about, *how* it is being talked about, and the subtext in the first scene of Act II.

There are many instances of events that are remembered in *The Homecoming,* such as Ruth's memories of her past profession as a model, Lenny's memories of meeting a woman down by the docks, and Max's memories of Jessie. How accurately do you think these memories reflect the past and how are they used to affect the current situation?

Ruth in *The Homecoming* and Kate in *Old Times* both end up in control of their situations. Compare and contrast how they achieve these positions of power. What part does "selective memory" play in these power struggles?

Compare and Contrast

1965: The feminist movement is getting underway, making demands for positive, concrete steps towards social equality and equality in the work-place for women.

Today: While there is greater consciousness about women's issues and many advances have been made, there is still inequality for women in many facets of contemporary society. There has been some backlash to the more radical and strident of feminists.

1965: The Sexual Revolution has begun, with sexual freedom being exhorted for both men and women. Concepts such as "Free Love" are advocated to free both mind and body.

Today: Society is more open regarding issues of sex. Sexual freedom in society is prevalent. Sexual issues are talked about and displayed in popular media that were unmentionable in 1965.

1965: Sexual promiscuity is prevalent, with many people having multiple sex partners. Sexually transmitted diseases, such as syphilis, are easily treatable.

Today: There is broad recognition that promiscuity and casual sex can lead to incurable ailments such as herpes. The outbreak of AIDS in the 1980s brings the realization that sex can kill.

1965: The United States, which has never lost a war, is one of two superpowers and is engaged in a "cold war" with the Soviet Union. The United States is also being drawn deeper and deeper into the war in Vietnam.

Today: The United States went through a major trauma because of wide-spread opposition to the war in Vietnam, a war which the country lost. Nevertheless, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late-1980s has left the United States as the only superpower in the world.

What Do I Read Next?

Two of Pinter's early plays provide background to *The Homecoming: The Birthday Party* (1958), Pinter's first full-length play, contains all the hallmarks of Pinter's style and concerns; *The Caretaker,* which opened April 17, 1960, at the small Arts Theatre Club in London, explores loneliness and power struggles among three men centered on a tramp who is given a place to stay by a mentally damaged man, tins play was Pinter's first major commercial success.

Pinter's *Old Times* (1970), delves into time and memory, which Pinter finds to be fluid and uncertain. It also further explores the inability of a man to fully know a woman or to possess her. It is a move away from the more realistic *The Homecoming.*

Glengarry Glen Ross by David Mamet shows the influence of Pinter, especially in the use of language, on the younger American playwright. The play was first produced in 1983 at the Royal National Theatre, London, at Pinter's suggestion.

Endgame by Samuel Beckett was first produced in 1957 in French at the Royal Court Theatre, London. This play has some of the qualities and concerns seen in *The Homecoming:* mutual interdependence of characters, hate, an enclosed environment, and the use of spare language and lack of specific background information Beckett is an acknowledged influence on Pinter.

Sexual Power by Carolyn Johnston, published by Alabama University Press in 1992, gives a feminist perspective on the American family from the seventeenth century to the present.

Further Study

Billington, Michael. *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter,* Faber & Faber, 1996.

This is by far the best and most complete biography of Pinter The commentary on the plays is extremely useful Billington has been the theatre critic for the *Guardian* newspaper since 1971.

Burkmann, Katheriue H. and John L Kuudert Gibbs, editors. *Pinter at Sixty,* Indiana University *Press,* 1963.

This is a collection of essays by scholars and Critics and gives a variety of views on Pinter's work as a whole.

Esslin, Marlin *Pinter. The Playwright,* Methuen, 1982.

First published in England under the title *The Peopled Wound,* Esslin's book covers all of Pinter's plays through *Victoria Station* (1982), and includes a short section on the screenplays Esslin provides great insight and a thoroughness of knowledge about European theatre that is matched by none.

Gussow, Mel. *Conversations with Pinter,* Grove Press, 1994.

This short book gives valuable insights into Pinter's working methods and his views on playwriting and life in general through a series of conversations with Gussow of the *New York Times* from 1971 to 1993.

Knowles, Ronald. *Understanding Harold Pinter,* University of South Carolina *Press,* 1995

Part of the "Understanding Contemporary Literature" series, this book offers criticism and interpretation and includes biographical references.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

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Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
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- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

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- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

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