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# I Laughed Until I Cried: The Tragicomedy of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*

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I LAUGHED UNTIL I CRIED: THE TRAGICOMEDY  
OF HAROLD PINTER'S *THE HOMECOMING*

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Kesha Garner  
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## Abstract

There appears to be a disconnect between the actual events of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* and the scholarly work devoted to the play—while each of the main characters are morally problematic, it is only the play's sole female character, Ruth, whose morality is questioned. This schism in which Ruth is questioned but others are not stems primarily from the time in which most of this criticism occurred: before post-structuralist understandings of gender undermined our presuppositions about the sexes. *The Homecoming* was written on the cusp of second-wave feminism, the movement focusing mainly on the legal and social equality of women, and it seems as though Pinter sensed a shift in paradigm in which feminist theorists called into question the phallogocentric language with which they were attempting to describe their subjects. A post-structuralist feminist reading of the play recognizes the problematic ways in which men are considered to have essential qualities, too. Pinter's *The Homecoming* encourages its audience to reconsider their conditioned perception of gender in society because the play induces the audience, in our real-life roles as conditioned observers, to misread the play; through undermining the false binary of humor and tragedy, Pinter asks the audience to reassess the supposed binary of male/female as it occurs in the play.

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## Introduction

In Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, Max repeatedly calls his dead wife a bitch and a whore. Teddy acquiesces to, and to some extent pushes, his wife to stay behind in England to be a prostitute and maid for his family. Joey, a boxer, admits to coercing women into having intercourse with him without proper contraception. Lenny, a self-confessed pimp, admits to beating and killing women on a regular basis. And yet, in "Modern Marriage in Collapse: A Study of Selected Plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter," Eugene Ngezem writes "Ruth's obnoxious behavior (prostitution) partly constitute[s] the moral tragedy of the play" (104). In "G.B. Shaw's *Heartbreak House* and Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*: Comedies of Implosion," Emil Roy writes that "Ruth rejects her husband, Teddy, who may have offered marriage as a form of redemption" from her assumed life as a prostitute (336). And, in "A Clue to the Pinter Puzzle: The Triple Self in *The Homecoming*," Arthur Ganz writes of Ruth's "thirst for . . . violence" and the ways in which the play is about "feminine dominance" (181, 186).

In retrospect, there appears to be a disconnect between the actual events of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* and the scholarly work devoted to the play—while each of the main characters are morally problematic, it is only Ruth's morality that is questioned. This schism in which Ruth is questioned but others are not stems primarily from the time in which most of this criticism occurred: before post-structuralist understandings of gender undermined our presuppositions about the sexes. Although the events in the play are not impossible, even contemporary playgoers have a notably visceral reaction to the events that take place even though, at least in the first act, the happenings seem rather

mundane. *The Homecoming*, first presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre in June of 1965, was written on the cusp of second-wave feminism, the movement focusing mainly on the legal and social equality of women, and it seems as though Pinter sensed a shift in paradigm in which feminist theorists called into question the phallogocentric language with which they were attempting to describe their subjects. Furthermore, a post-structuralist feminist reading of the play also recognizes the problematic ways in which men are considered to have essential qualities, too. Pinter's *The Homecoming* encourages its audience to reconsider their conditioned perception of gender in society because the play induces the audience, in our real-life roles as conditioned observers, to misread the play; through undermining the false binary of humor and tragedy, Pinter asks the audience to reassess the supposed binary of male/female as it occurs in the play.

While most critics of Pinter's work focus almost exclusively on Ruth's character (which they label as shocking and licentious), I am primarily interested in the ways in which critics of the play have bought into and perpetuated not only a stereotypical woman but a facile representation of men as well. I will situate my understanding of the play first in terms of post-structuralism, analyzing the ways in which humor and tragedy come together to create a middle mode in the play. My understanding of post-structural theory is informed primarily by Jacques Derrida's "Différance" and his work with oppositions in meaning-making. Furthermore, by showing this unstable relationship between humor and tragedy, my arguments serve to undermine the gender essentialism that has informed critics' understandings of Pinter's work thus far; Derrida, in his

scholarship related to a non-essentialist way of understanding language (i.e. that one must know a word's opposite, and the entire array of proximate words as well, to fully comprehend the original) informs both my understanding of the supposed male/female binary as well as the humor/tragedy dichotomy.

Having situated *The Homecoming* in terms of post-structural linguistic theory, I will analyze the character of Ruth, so often written-off as a mother/whore figure simply because of her status as female, in terms of post-structural feminist theory, focusing on Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Irigaray, who, as the title of her book indicates, writes that women are essentially non-subjects, informs my understanding of Ruth as a non-subject. Also, Butler informs my understanding of the primary failing of feminism: that is, reifying that gender is fixed and that women, and therefore men too, are a group with common characteristics and interests. First, I will show that reading the characters in retrospect illustrates the presuppositions the audience and subsequent critics of the play had about them. In order to investigate the reification of gender norms and the ability for *The Homecoming* to subvert them, I will then examine the ways in which scholars have come to understand Ruth in particular, apparently playing off of and buying into one another's understanding of her as a character. Though gender essentialism is often used to problematize our understandings of women, I find that *The Homecoming* serves as a locus to undermine our understandings of men as well. Finally, I will show that Pinter's undermining of our stable conceptions of tragedy and comedy should be read as indications that our understanding of masculinity and femininity should not be considered stable concepts,

either. Through this updated reading of Ruth and the male characters, one finds that the play is suitable for a contemporary audience for whom post-structural feminist theory is not a foreign concept; perhaps the play is more relevant now as third-wave feminism attempts to correct the problems that second-wave feminism introduced through the marginalization of women and men into false categories. Though feminism is not necessarily required to understand the play, it provides an updated lens through which to analyze characters which have frequently been misread and misunderstood.

### I. “Nothing is Funnier”: Pinter’s Tragicomedy

#### “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness”—Nell, *Endgame*

There is something inherently tragic about the notion of a mother leaving her children in order to pursue a career as a prostitute, yet, as the play closes, we find ourselves laughing as Max grovels at his daughter-in-law’s feet, begging for a kiss he never receives. Though I will later argue that Ruth refuses this offer, the fact that this proposal is even made is tragic. This uncomfortable combination of humor and tragedy, both stemming from the audience’s acceptance of Ruth’s position, occurs throughout the play and is most notable in the violence and domination that occurs. Audiences laugh at the way Lenny beats women, the way Joey coerces women into having unprotected sex, and the way each of the sons treat their elderly—though equally as violent and domineering—father, Max. Though we are laughing, we must also feel a sense of guilt at our laughter because violence in any form should never be entertaining. One of the most surprising aspects of the play is its propensity to elicit conflicting feelings toward Ruth.

Critics such as Adler and Ngezem loathe her—find her station in life humorous—while contemporary critics, especially Yan and Prentice, recognize the tragedy in the offer presented to her, whether she accepts it or not. Liu Yan, in “Manipulation or Maginalization: An Analysis of the Identity of Pinter’s Ruth,” discusses the ways in which men’s commodification of women (both within the play and in the real world) is tragic. The tragedy is furthered by the audience’s easy acceptance of this commodification’s existence as well as by the fact that we find it humorous that Ruth should be put into this situation. In “Ruth: Pinter’s *The Homecoming* Revisited,” however, Penelope Prentice argues that Ruth is understood frequently as the aggressor despite the fact that her family is attempting to coerce her into prostitution. The concept of Ruth as a whore is permanently linked to the understanding of humor and tragedy because both elicit a visceral response from audiences. Our perceptions of *The Homecoming* are formed through a sense of stable understandings of the world—i.e., that tragedy and comedy must never coincide and that women are essentially mothers, whores, or both but nothing more. If our understanding of the concept of humor and tragedy is subverted, then so might be our understanding of womanhood.

If the stability of language and the supposed binary opposition of tragedy/comedy are subverted, then we can understand the character Ruth in a more meaningful way because Ruth embodies both tragedy and comedy. Martin Esslin, speaking of *The Homecoming* in “Beckett and the ‘Theater of the Absurd,’” writes: “language itself, in the light of so much uncertainty, will be perceived as being far from so unproblematic a medium of exchange and communication” (45). Though Esslin was speaking specifically

of the ways in which language is devoid of any meaningful communication in Absurdist theater, post-structuralism, epitomized by Jacques Derrida's "Différance," is also concerned with the ways language functions in reality. Post-structuralism reacts to the idea that language functions as an operational code of oppositions. Derrida, in his discussion of the mechanism of language, writes about the ways in which words both "differ" and defer": words can never fully give up their meanings, but we must constantly defer back to additional words from which the original word differs. This is particularly evident in reactions to *The Homecoming*, which forces audiences to accept a range of emotions that come together in a middle mode wherein they are forced to laugh and cry simultaneously (Derrida 3-27).

Though we like to think that the world can be compartmentalized, and though language often functions as a way to create binaries and, thus, meaning, post-structuralists argue that these oppositions are often false. (Though post-structuralists believe these oppositions are false, they do recognize their importance in intelligibility.) In order for misconceptions about these supposed oppositions to exist, we must first believe that there are qualities in these concepts that are essential to the nature of the thing, say, an essential property of tragedy would be a complete lack of humor. In *Rational Woman: A Feminist Critique of Dichotomy*, Raia Prokhovnik explains that, rather than two dichotomous concepts being completely disconnected, they are actually necessarily linked. She writes,

[a] rational mode of theorising. . . argues for the intellectual and social benefits of recognising that within each dualism, that is, within

the pair . . . understood as an either/or, the relationship, the connection, the interdependence between the two parts is crucial to the character of both parts. (14)

In Pinter's work, this opposition of tragedy and comedy serves to heighten the effect of tragedy with comic counter-pointing. Though the opposition of tragedy and comedy seems self-evident, the understanding of the binary as a false dichotomy helps to undermine our supposed stable meanings of the concepts—this is evident in audiences' reactions to the play and their inability to decide whether to laugh or cry.

Rather than analyzing the ways in which language appears to force us to create oppositions of tragedy and comedy in order to understand them more fully, one can look at specific examples where the two concepts come together to create a middle mode. In his book *Modern Tragicomedy and the British Tradition*, Richard Dutton places the beginnings of tragicomedy in the Renaissance, explaining that ancient critics in Greece and Rome (Aristotle and Horace, most notably) defined the terms tragedy and comedy in such a way as to imply “disapproval of any mingling of the two” (25). (Note, it was Aristotle's teacher, Plato, who conceptualized the theory of *forms* that gave rise to essentialism.) Furthermore, Cicero ruled that “In tragedy anything comic is a defect and in comedy anything tragic is unseemly” (Dutton 16). Despite these decrees, tragicomedy became a popular form of theater as early as Plautus and found a revival in the Theater of the Absurd during the 1960s. Even though the traditions of tragicomedy were not new, audiences found this mingling of humor and tragedy unsettling. In attempting to describe and define tragicomedy (“so tantalisingly indefinite in its connotations”), Dutton quotes

Pinter, who describes his plays as “funny up to a point. Beyond that point it ceases to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it” (9-10). For audiences to face the problem that there may not be a distinct difference between humor and tragedy, they must also face the possibility that their understandings of other concepts presented in the play (namely, that Ruth is simply a whore) must also be undermined.

The feeling that human existence cannot be easily summed up in a traditional play is one that Pinter utilizes in his works. In *Beckett, Ionesco, and the Tradition of Tragicomedy*, Enoch Brater writes that “centuries of theater-going had trained [audiences] to laugh at the comic and weep at the tragic,” but that new playwrights were “suggesting that the responses could be integrated and sometimes reversed” (114), presumably because this is more true to real life. In life, even when extremely emotional events are over, there is some sense of never having closure, whether these events are tragic or joyful. (For example, the end of World War II did not bring closure—instead, it left people asking why it needed to happen in the first place.) The same is true for Pinter’s plays: because the comic and the tragic overlap and are interchangeable, there is no catharsis. (Though it seems that tragedy would be sufficient to portray traumatic events, there is catharsis even in tragedy, but rarely in real life.) Finally, Brater explains:

Tragedy meant self-discovery and rebirth, a second chance, a last chance; it involved an underlying possibility that things *might* be different from the way things were, it was entirely too optimistic, even in its hopelessness. (115)

As *The Homecoming* closes with the men groveling at Ruth's feet, there is no sense of hope, nor a sense that things could have been different. Rather than leaving with a sense of closure, audiences must acknowledge that they are laughing at men groveling at the feet of a woman when, in reality, they should perhaps be weeping at the tragedy if the only way Ruth can earn this supposed respect is by becoming a prostitute. If this is the case—that audiences should feel a sense of the humorous and the tragic while Max grovels at Ruth's feet—then the next step is to recognize the absurdity of the essentialism that caused these reactions. Only when we see men as perpetually strong-willed and dominant over women does it seem funny to see them groveling. And while many of us, particularly those watching the play today, see the tragedy in Ruth's position, there is also a sense of tragedy in Max's position: if we find it so amusing that Max is behaving in this manner, then we compartmentalize men just as much as we do women. If Max's groveling at Ruth's feet is humorous, then we are buying into a facile understanding of a manhood that aligns dominance with masculinity. Though the play leaves us with the sense that things could not have ended differently, the audience was presented with a play that could have been read differently but was not, primarily due to the socially constructed idea that men and women were supposed to act exactly as they did in *The Homecoming*.

This sense of instability seems to be lost on critics who automatically assume Ruth is a whore, that she plans on returning to prostitution, and that she has somehow taken advantage of the men in the play. To buy into the premise that Ruth is a whore, one must also buy into the play as either a comedy or a tragedy, and it is impossible to do so.

Just as language seeks to compartmentalize concepts, so too is Ruth compartmentalized by critics, by the men in the play, and by audiences, alike. An updated re-reading of Ruth that takes into account the instability of language in the play will also help one understand the instability of our understanding of her as a woman.

## II. Rereading Ruth

**“There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened.”—Harold Pinter**

*The Homecoming*, through its use of perceived binaries, undermines our supposed stable understandings of the terms humor and tragedy, leads discerning critics to question everything in the play, including the characterization of Ruth. Though the false binaries of humor/tragedy can be undermined through an understanding of the function of language, Pinter’s play primarily subverts our understanding of Ruth by presenting to the audience an exaggerated version of the supposed essential characteristics of womanhood: particularly passivity and harlotry.

Critics such as Yan and Prentice are beginning to broaden our understandings of Ruth as a character, yet the scholarship devoted to her is still widely skewed: she is continuously read as a victimizer and a whore, despite evidence to the contrary. While many of the goals of second-wave feminism have been reached, this blatant buying-in to this simplistic understanding of womanhood shows that the goals of third-wave feminism continue to elude us. As I mentioned previously, Judith Butler is concerned with the failings of feminism. Second-wave feminist theorists, in attempting to describe women,

have, once again, compartmentalized them and post-structural feminists are attempting to subvert these notions that have become ingrained in our society. One of the most important tasks of feminism in the twenty-first century is to look at the ways men and boys are thought to have characteristics in an inverse relation to women and that these opposed traits are essential to manhood. Just as pigeonholing women into particular categories is damaging to them, so is it damaging to deny men a full range of emotions and characteristics. Rather than looking at *The Homcoming* as a play in which a domineering mother/whore figure comes to dominate her husband's family, one can look at the play as though Ruth is an embodiment of our misunderstandings and assumptions about women. (I will explore further the ways in which the play calls into question our understanding of men.) There are two benefits to looking at Ruth as an embodiment of our assumptions about women: first, it allows Ruth to emblemize the belief that women are entities whose meaning is imbued by men. The second reason for looking at Ruth in this way is that it finally relieves Ruth from her position as a scapegoat, and, instead, allows audience members to analyze her actions as they are presented rather than as they have frequently been assumed to occur.

There is significant textual evidence that indicates that Ruth embodies certain characteristics frequently assumed to be essential to womanhood. The first evidence that Ruth is an archetype is that she is seen, simply, as a figurative reincarnation of Jessie. In a two-act play with little back-story, it is imperative that characters be aligned in such a way as to inform one another and provide the audience with some sort of characterization: any information we receive regarding one character's past can be, in

essence, understood to apply to his or her parallel character. The use of interdependent pairs is seen frequently throughout Pinter's work and assists audience members in the understanding of characters by providing pieces of information that can be dispersed among the characters. In *The Homecoming*, the usual interdependent pairs, typically two men or a male and a female, are actually composed of triads. (Teddy, Lenny, and Joey are considered a set because of their similar sounding names. The same is true for Max, Sam, and Mac. Understanding the men in their groupings is important, and, later, I will be discussing it further.) The most interesting pair, however, is an actual pair: Ruth and Jessie. Though Jessie and Ruth will of course be compared because they are the only two significant women in the play and the only two women in the family, the fact that they are both women tells us little about them, but rather exploits presuppositions about gender.

The first time that Jessie and Ruth are compared, it is through Max's understanding of each woman as a whore. When meeting Ruth for the first time, he says to Teddy, "I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died" (42). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues against Max's categorization of women, saying "the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (19). Throughout the play, we learn about each male character by what he does and how he interacts with other characters, but for Ruth, we are only privileged to learn about her through what the male characters say about her and through her alignment with a dead woman.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray explains that “to correspond to a man’s desire, [a woman] has to identify herself with his mother” (70). Though Ruth, having never met Jesse, has not identified herself with her husband’s mother, the men in the play immediately begin to align the two women. Furthermore, only through her alignment with Jessie do we understand any motivation behind Ruth’s character. Ruth also has no past, save for the one that the men—critics and characters—insist she had as a prostitute. We learn none of these things from Ruth herself. In the same way that a puppet is imbued with life through the puppet master, Ruth’s past is shaped completely through our understanding of Jessie and the assumptions that have been made about these women and, to a certain extent, all women.

That Ruth agrees with almost everything the men say and ask of her further proves that Pinter was playing with characteristics of the stereotypes of gender. Ruth is a non-subject whose personality is formed by men, as are all women, Lin Yan might argue. Yan explains that “man possesses the power to speak and to represent, [therefore] he gives woman an image that is based on his idealization of women in general” (289-290). In fact, all women in the play are characterized merely by the ways in which men react to them and, as characters, the way they are presented by the men to the audience. This is most obvious in Ruth; however, Jessie is only understood by the ways in which she is represented by her abusive husband and incompetent children, and it is the only way that she can be represented since she is deceased.

Interestingly, though the play seems to provide ample evidence that Ruth is an overly passive woman, critics have often found her to be an aggressive character while

simultaneously ignoring the men's frequent violent outbursts. The text, however, is contrary to the notion that Ruth is violent. Through a number of particular scenes, audience members can see that, rather than being the aggressor, Ruth is simply following the lead of the men; yet, somehow, she gets blamed for the corrupt events that take place in the play. The first event occurs when Lenny and Teddy are discussing the topic of philosophy. Ruth says,

It's a leg . . . moving. 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. (53)

Though most critics have read this scene as an overtly sexual one, I disagree. Ruth says that, though her lips move and words are coming out, the fact that they are moving is more significant. This parallels the way the men in the play (and critics of the play) see Ruth, whose lips move and words come out, but the words do not really matter. As I previously showed, the words do not matter because men (critics) will automatically interpret them as they see fit. (Recall the instance of Esslin, who decided that Ruth is a whore despite her never giving any indication that she was.) Finally, though what Ruth says is important (at least in an updated reading), the responses toward her by the men are significant in understanding our perceived notions about the characteristics of essential manhood.

There are a number of other instances in which Ruth acts almost unbelievably passively, two in particular having to do with her sexual relations with her husband's

family. Keep in mind that critics have blamed Ruth wholly for these relationships despite the fact that the men are just as much to blame; in fact, I argue that the men convince her to stay without full disclosure of their plan. However, the evidence in the play shows that Ruth, once again, was being acted upon rather than doing the action herself. First consider her openly kissing Lenny and Joey. Ruth and Lenny are dancing. Pinter's stage directions read: "*Lenny kisses Ruth*" (58). Joey then comes down the stairs and begins kissing her as well: "*He sits with Ruth on the sofa, embraces and kisses her;*" then "*Joey lies heavily on Ruth*" (59). In each of these stage directions, Ruth is simply being acted upon. She makes no attempt to get the men off of her, but neither does she put any effort into kissing them back. She is acting passively, just as women are expected. The same instance occurs later when Joey takes Ruth to his bedroom. Max, seemingly disappointed in his son, says, "He's had her up there for two hours and he didn't go the whole hog" (66). Though the audience never sees Ruth enter or leave Joey's room, critics and audience members have always assumed that she was there despite the fact that even critics acknowledge the dishonesty of the characters in the play. Though it can certainly be argued that Ruth did not accompany Joey to his bedroom, the important aspect of this scene is that Joey and the other men, not Ruth, present these "facts" to the audience.

So, rather than interpreting Ruth as shocking and licentious and condemning her for supposedly being a whore as many critics have, looking at her as a locus of misunderstanding provides an updated look at the way in which Pinter presented his characters. Our conditioned perceptions of gender in society allow us to read into the play what is actually not there—Ruth as a whore. At the time the play was written, the

importance of looking at women in new and different ways was at the forefront; however, contemporary audiences, possibly influenced by feminism, benefit from looking at the actions of the men. It is apparent that men in Pinter's play are rarely criticized for their actions, except to be called submissive. Reading them in such a superficial way is neither true nor helpful. It is clear that the men victimize Ruth throughout the play and force their ideas of the perfect—the essential—woman upon her; however, it is just as important to recognize that the acceptance of the men acting in such a way is just as problematic. Audiences reading Pinter today would be more aware of the failings of second-wave feminism, the ways in which compartmentalizing women (and men) does not serve them, nor does it serve post-structural feminist theory and language theory; this knowledge helps modern audiences see past Pinter's reification of gender norms and forces them to reconsider their preconceived notions of gender.

### **III. : Ruth Misrepresented**

**Ruth: How did you know she was diseased?**

**Lenny: How did I know?**

*Pause.*

**I decided she was. —Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming***

I have provided evidence that Ruth's position in the play has frequently been misinterpreted by critics and audience members: it is important to take into account the function of language in Pinter's representation of Ruth and how this aligns with our understanding of tragedy and comedy. I've discussed a number of ways that Ruth can be

reread; however, there continues to be the question of whether Ruth actually accepts the proposition of the family. I previously discussed the ways in which our acceptance of binaries allows us to read Ruth in a particular way. Now, an updated reading of Ruth, taking into account theory that has developed since the writing of the play and most of the criticism of it, proves that our assumptions about the proposition as a whole—and about women—can actually be undermined. In a bizarre instance of an author's foreshadowing the criticism of his work, Pinter's character Lenny describes how he knows that a woman who had attempted to have sex with him was diseased. "I decided she was," he says (Pinter 31). Reminiscent of Lenny's declaration, Martin Esslin decided that Ruth was a whore in *Theater of the Absurd* and other critics have been following suit (256). It proves difficult, however, to find the evidence of which Esslin speaks. The instance about which Esslin is writing provides little information with regard to Ruth's life. Ruth, when describing her former job as a model, only notes the following:

[W]e used to change and walk down towards the lake . . . we went down a path . . . on stones . . . there were . . . on this path. Oh, just . . . wait . . . yes . . . when we changed in the house we had a drink. [. . .] Most often . . . we walked down to the lake . . . and did our modeling there. (Pinter 57)

Despite having described language as "far from so unproblematic a medium of exchange and communication" in "Beckett and the 'Theater of the Absurd,'" Esslin seems to take Ruth's words at face value, or, perhaps he reads her in the way he wishes to read her (in

terms of an essentialist mother/whore figure). Despite the apparent inaccuracy of Esslin's assertion, critics of Pinter's work have continued to buy into the premise.

Furthermore, not only have critics labeled Ruth a prostitute, but Jessie, the dead and perpetually offstage mother-in-law, is labeled one, as well. In "A Clue to the Pinter Puzzle: The Triple Self in *The Homecoming*," Arthur Ganz explains that the male characters can be assigned by name into groups: Max, Mac, and Sam and Lenny, Teddy, and Joey. Ganz explains that, besides similar names, these respective groups of men have other characteristics in common. Categorized in such a way, each of the men has a counterpart in the other group: Joey and Mac are both sexually active and brutish (apparently having sex with other men's wives), Sam and Teddy are seen as quiet, reserved, and more intellectual than the others, while Max and Lenny both appear to embody both extremes of each group. In speaking of the women, Ganz goes on to write that

just as each male "person" is fragmented into three parts, so each woman—though embodied in a single presence—plays three different roles: she is at once wife, mother, and prostitute. (181)

There is a two-fold analysis to be made in terms of Ruth's alignment with Jessie and whether or not this makes each woman a prostitute. First, textual evidence supports the idea that Jessie had an illicit affair with her husband's best friend. Sam, perhaps the most reliable—and morally responsible—character, tells Max that "MacGregor had Jessie in the back of my cab as I drove along" before collapsing in a faint (Pinter 78). If readers believe Sam, then Jessie was, in fact, an adulterer, but that in no way makes her a

prostitute. Besides, who among us would blame Jessie for cheating on a husband that describes his wife as “[not] 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” (Pinter 9). Because Jessie is offstage and we only learn about her through unreliable narrators, there’s a possibility that she *was* a prostitute. Considering the plans the family had for Ruth, it is not far-fetched to think that Jessie was expected to fulfill the same role that Ruth was expected to fill. It is possible, then, that the two women were merely parallels in terms of the abuse they suffered from the men of the family—even if Jessie was a prostitute, there is no textual evidence that Ruth is one.

Continuing this line of reasoning, the play’s closing scene complicates matters: the play ends with Ruth’s apparent acceptance of the offer to become a prostitute. This scene proves problematic to the argument that Pinter’s play can be used to subvert the idea of gender essentialism; however, in “Ruth: Pinter’s *The Homecoming* Revisited,” Penelope Prentice provides compelling arguments about the language presented in the text. First, even Prentice, who is adamant that Ruth is not a prostitute, admits that there is a *possibility* that Ruth does actually accept this offer, but it seems unlikely considering her *laissez faire* attitude toward sex with Joey. Prentice believes that, rather than simply accepting the offer,

the best textual evidence indicates that Ruth will neither remain nor agree to their proposal. She deliberately skirts commitment by conducting negotiations in strictly conditional verbs, using the conditional, or contrafactual, tense throughout. (459)

“I would want at least three rooms and a bathroom,” Ruth says, preposterously, when Lenny offers her a flat in which to do her business (76). For this family, a flat with three rooms and a bathroom seems like an expensive endeavor, even if Ruth were to bring in money through prostitution. Perhaps rather than accepting the offer, as Pinter’s critics and play-goers have assumed, Ruth is attempting to have the offer retracted or to make a joke of the situation. She continues to make demands: “You’d supply my wardrobe, of course?” and “I’d need an awful lot” (77). None of these comments are an acceptance of a proposition, but rather a counter-demand she does not expect to be met. Finally, after Sam has collapsed due to the complete moral reprehensibility of it all, Max asks, “Do you want to shake on it now, or do you want to leave it til later?” Ruth, of course, says “Oh, we’ll leave it til later” (79). Had Ruth been the complete degenerate she is often believed to be, the deal surely would have been made quickly as to secure her flat with three rooms and a bathroom. The deal is never made, and even Max questions whether Ruth will actually make good on her part of the as-yet-unmade deal. He makes it a point to say

You understand what I mean? Listen, I’ve got a funny idea  
she’ll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She’ll use us, she’ll  
make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it! You want to bet? (81)

Because Ruth never acquiesces to the proposition, she never actually submits herself to the “degradation of her role as prostitute,” a role that scholars so often believe she has brought on herself (Ganz 181).

Critics seem to focus overwhelmingly on this scene in which Ruth appears to be making arrangements for her new career; however, rarely have they written about how

this idea of her being a prostitute in the future actually came about. In fact, the men make these plans without Ruth's knowledge—Ruth is not even in the room as this decision is made. Critics have spent copious amounts of time writing as though Ruth took part in planning, and was comfortable—even eager—to take part in this plan, but in reality, she was never given enough detail to fully understand her new position and yet she is condemned for going along with the plan. The only information about the actual proposal Ruth receives, other than that she will have a flat of her own, is provided by Lenny and Max.

Lenny: You'd just have to pop up to the flat for a couple of hours a night, that's all.

Max: Just a couple hours, that's all. That's all. (76)

Furthermore, Teddy, who is privy to all the planning and who scholars have often seen as a victim, tells Ruth:

Ruth . . . the family have invited you to stay, for a little while longer.

As a . . . as a kind of guest. If you like the idea I don't mind. We can manage very easily at home . . . until you come back. (75)

After these plans and arrangements are made, Ruth enters the room and one of two things occurs: either Ruth knew that the men planned on using her as a prostitute and she was attempting to have them retract their offer through her use of conditional phrasing or she was not aware of the plan. Max, interestingly, does not believe that Ruth knows the plan. He asks,

Lenny, do you think she understands . . . what . . . what . . . what . . . we're getting at? What . . . we've got in mind? Do you think she's got it clear? [. . .] I don't think she's got it clear. (81)

Though the play seems to show Ruth accepting the offer of prostitution, and critics have certainly bought into this notion, a number of factors seem to show otherwise. Ruth's conditional phrasing as well as the possibility that she does not truly know what the men have planned serves to undermine this belief: rather than proving anything about women, this scene shows the absurd nature of the expectations men and society place on women.

Whether or not Jessie and Ruth were prostitutes is equivocal and, perhaps, in the end, not as important as some critics tend to think. The most important aspect of the Ruth/Jessie pairing is that they, the only female family members in the play, are and have been compartmentalized into particular roles. Speaking again of Sam's revelation to Max about Jessie's extramarital affairs, Ganz writes: "Moreover, by placing Sam's revelation about Jessie at the point of Ruth's final commitment to the family, Pinter reinforces the conception of Jessie and Ruth as parallel wife-mother-prostitute figures" (185). This understanding of women as essentially mother/whore figures runs throughout criticism of Pinter's work and much of literature as a whole, though, fortunately literary scholarship is presently moving beyond this facile thinking. The mother/whore dichotomy, stemming from the idea that women are composed of essential, though perhaps opposing and distinct, elements arises, in part, from Freudian psychoanalysis and is most commonly linked with the Oedipus complex. (Essentialism, understood through Plato's theory of *form*, is now understood as "a belief that certain phenomena are natural, inevitable,

universal, and biologically determined” [ DeLamater 10]). Martin Esslin buys into this Oedipal (and essentialist) reading of Ruth. He explains that the final tableau is “the culmination of their [the sons’] Oedipal dreams”: “their mother, young and beautiful, has become available to them as a sexual partner, as a ‘whore’” (qtd. in Yan 294). The text, however, shows no evidence of Ruth’s being available to these men: we never see her job as a prostitute come to fruition, and Joey admits that he is not able to have intercourse with her.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray theorized that the roles of mother and whore are imposed on women by men in a patriarchal society rather than being essential parts of womanhood (186). Yan explains that, “therefore, in the male imagination, a woman should serve as a mother, a prostitute, a virgin, any role that can satisfy men’s needs for power exchange and men’s various desires” (293). Though critics such as Martin Esslin, Arthur Ganz, and Eugene Ngezem read Ruth as a mother/whore character, considering the lack of textual evidence to make that claim, one can assume that these critics are simply projecting their understanding of the patriarchal society onto Ruth. Thomas P. Adler, in “Notes Toward the Archetypal Pinter Woman,” describes the thought process behind this misunderstanding of womanhood. Writing about Teddy’s acquiescence to Ruth’s supposed desire to stay behind and be a prostitute, Adler writes

For if the failure of most men is to fragment the woman, thinking she can find fulfillment in being *only* a wife, or *only* a mother, or *only* a whore, the otherwise dense Teddy perceives that he has done all he can for Ruth and that she now needs to be simultaneously all these and more. (382)

Continuing this line of reasoning, Adler quotes Walter Kerr, who writes “looked at existentially . . . no woman is essentially wife or essentially whore, she is potentially either or both at once. . .” (qtd. Adler 382). Despite Adler’s assertion that Ruth can be a wife, a whore, “and more,” neither he nor Kerr expand on what these choices may be, and both critics continue to perpetuate this mother/whore essentialism. Furthermore, even in Adler’s and Kerr’s attempt to expand women’s possibilities, they each believe that women *must* display some component of this dichotomy within their character—they can be more than *just* a mother/whore, but never *not* a mother/whore. In retrospect, taking into consideration post-structuralist feminism, critics’ easily-made assumptions about Ruth exemplify the problems that *The Homecoming* can now be used to undermine: the assumption that women can and should be compartmentalized into categories of mother or whore, but also that they must be one, the other, or both and nothing more.

#### IV. Salvaging Sam

**Well, look at it this way. How can the unknown merit reverence? In other words, how can you revere that of which you’re ignorant? —Lenny, *The Homecoming***

Though Ruth is the primary locus of misreading in *The Homecoming*, the male characters, particularly in light of the current feminist movement, should also be called into question. I discussed previously the ways in which Ruth’s character is problematic, especially because we react to her as both a comedic and tragic character. Most critics have characterized Ruth as a whore (though, I would argue, incorrectly) and little time

has been spent on the male characters except in an attempt to show that they are victims rather than victimizers. In such case when the men have been analyzed, it has been as characters—taking into account their actions and what little we know about their pasts—while Ruth has been seen as an archetypal woman. If we assume that Ruth is an archetypal woman who embodies passivity, whoredom, and other allegedly essential characteristics, then so must the men be examined in the same vein. Critics, and Arthur Ganz most notably, discuss the ways in which Ruth and Jessie are aligned and, to a lesser degree, the ways in which the men in the play are aligned, particularly in terms of their names. However, I find that each male character represented a piece of the archetypal man—and this fragmentation, perhaps, is the most telling in terms of feminist theory. As Butler notes, it is just as problematic to compartmentalize men as it is to do so to women. In fact, it is more acceptable today for women to have a broad range of emotions while men are encouraged only to display a few elements of their character. Max, Sam, Lenny, Teddy, and Joey, however, encompass each of these supposed essential elements of manhood—and one element that we believe leads to complete emasculation.

It has long been assumed that the essential qualities of women are simple—mother (and all of its connotations, including maid) and whore (with all of its connotations)—but recent strides in feminism have allowed women to break free (at least somewhat) from these labels. Men, on the other hand, are offered a wider number of possibilities, though, in contemporary times, any deviation from these essential qualities of manhood are more condemned than a woman straying from her supposedly essential nature. These characteristics that men embody—must embody—are intelligence,

aggression, and sexual prowess (including fathering children). The antithesis of these qualities is, of course, anything resembling the feminine: passivity and whoredom. Furthermore, each of the qualities—the revered and the hated—is dealt with in the play in similar ways that they would be dealt with in real life.

The characteristics and demeanors of Teddy, Max, Lenny, and Joey are frequently discussed in Pinter criticism, and I do not disagree with these critics' interpretations of the men other than to say that Pinter presented them in such a way that it is more beneficial for the audience to analyze them rather than to merely accept them as they are. Though critics and audiences frequently fail to do so, Pinter sets up the play so that the unstable categories of tragedy and comedy undermine our supposedly stable understandings of gender. Critics have labeled Teddy the intellect, Joey the aggressor—he does, after all, have an overly masculine career as a boxer—Max as the father figure, and Lenny as the pimp (signifying the ways in which it is essential to manhood to take part in the sexual commodification of women). Furthermore, though critics have, in passing, mentioned Sam's supposed homosexuality (“You'd bend over for half a dollar on Blackfriars Bridge,” Max alleges [49]) and passivity, rarely have they taken into consideration the ways in which the play is set up to undermine our understanding of gender.

Sam, though treated harshly by his family, is primarily understood as the most morally commendable character in *The Homecoming*. Even Prentice, in her reconsideration of character in the play, notes that “Except for Teddy's uncle Sam, all of the others including Teddy himself encourage Ruth to remain with the family in England

. . .” (458). Because Sam refuses to accept this arrangement, he is automatically set apart from the other characters. Sam rejects the idea of commodification of women and, though readers today would find this quality admirable, traditionally this reaction would be seen as contrary to masculinity. Pinter, having set up the play in such a way that we question the binaries of tragedy/comedy and masculine/feminine, closes the play having left Sam in an ambiguous situation—audience members are not sure whether he is dead or alive. After revealing that “MacGreggor had Jessie in the back of my cab . . .” (78), the stage directions say that Sam “croaks [vernacular for “dies”] and collapses,” but does not explain whether he made a strange noise or if he actually dies (79). The stage directions offer no further evidence to discern what has happened. Whether Sam dies or has merely collapsed, he has, in essence, been debilitated for his betrayal of the masculine order of buying and selling women. That Pinter ends the play with Sam’s death makes a statement: the feminine man must die in order to restore order. Though the death of the effeminate man and the continued commodification of women appears to restore order to Pinter’s play, it remains problematic because the audience is left with so many unanswered questions. These questions first arise from the confusion surrounding the tragicomedy. Pinter set up the play so that the audience, unable to differentiate between humor and tragedy, would begin to question the other supposed binaries within the play, particularly those of masculinity and femininity; however, critics bought into a simplistic reading of *The Homecoming* that took all actions and all characters at face value. Pinter, sensing a shift in paradigm, produced a play that is more suitable to audiences today who are more familiar with the techniques further fleshed out by post-structuralism which

shows that binaries are often false. To fully understand a thing's supposed opposition, one must fully understand its opposite because the opposites actually inform each other and, more significantly, embody each other.

Pinter's exploitation of supposed essential qualities of gender encourages contemporary perceptions of characters to be seen as ironic; an understanding of the characters through a feminist lens also provides evidence that compartmentalization of genders into binary oppositions is not only wrong but impossible. Though critics' superficial readings of Ruth proves that there is still much work to be done with respect to understanding women, critics such as Yan and Prentice are working toward a less patriarchal view of Ruth. Despite this important and relevant work, third-wave feminism points out that men have been impaired by our views of women as well, particularly in that men are supposed to act as complete opposites of women. This is the view that allows Ruth to be seen as completely passive, the men to be seen and accepted as violent, and any digression from the supposed norm to be seen as comedy. Much as tragedy and comedy are never supposed to cross paths according to Horace, gender essentialists believe that masculinity and femininity should never mingle, either. Though much of post-structuralist feminism undermined this belief, there is work yet to be done. By thinking of men and women in terms of opposites, we are refusing to accept the middle mode that Dutton found so important in tragicomedy. If contemporary audiences no longer buy into the idea of women as necessarily being a certain way, then it creates a space for understanding that men should not be compartmentalized in such a way, either. Though Pinter's techniques are important for subverting our notions of womanhood

through his use of humor and tragedy, it is also important to use them in the same way to reassess our views placed on men. Although we are often conditioned to believe that men and women are binary opposites and that each embodies a set of characteristics essential to their nature, Pinter serves to undermine this notion as well. Although Pinter was writing around the time that many theorists were coming to this realization, his play anticipates the work that would be done regarding gender essentialism in the realm of feminism. So, while Pinter's understanding of the subtleties of language informed his ideas regarding ways in which tragedy and comedy function in the same space, these understandings can be further utilized in contemporary productions of the play.

Reconsidering our ideas about men surely help us continue to re-evaluate our ideas about women. If we are still able to see the irony in Pinter's play when applying this new manner of analysis, then the play will continue to serve its purpose of undermining our preconceived notions about comedy and tragedy, men and women, reality and fiction, and meaning-making in a world with no apparent ultimate meaning.

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