

Modernism and Social Condition: A Study on Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*

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Abstract

The present study pursues the evolution of an organized system of play writing known as the modern and contemporary social drama. It is believed that this social drama has its roots in the condition of life in the nineteenth century and in a larger sense, it is the inevitable consequence of a long process which has begun with the Renaissance. In relation to this inquiry, the present study by focusing on Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1965) attempts to clarify the social position of men and women in the modern drama. In this regard, the present paper points briefly to the social condition of life in the nineteenth century, and considers its inevitable effects on our time and then depicts the reflection of that condition on modern social drama.

Key words: Social drama; Modernism; Nineteenth century; Social condition

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INTRODUCTION

Up to the Modern history, western civilization has been shaped by two different major trends of making sense of reality. The first, typically referred to as the Pre-Modern worldview, was the God-centered, biblically-based

perspective that generally shaped our culture beginning in the fourth century. In this view God was the defining reality out of which our understanding of Self, Others, and the universe was derived. The Self was subject to God, governed by virtue, alongside Others was concerned with the relationships of self-giving and service, and served by creation. Then began a shift of worldviews, a lurching transition starting with the Renaissance and culminating during the time known as the Enlightenment. Over that time humanity and the physical world began to loom ever larger, moving more and more into the center of the picture, while God — initially relegated to the fringes — was eventually lopped out of the picture altogether. When the dust settled, we found ourselves looking through new glasses, standing within what came to be known as the Modern worldview. A naturalistic worldview that had no place for the supernatural, the Modern view was dominated by Man and reason: Man, occupied center stage, and reason, emerged as the new authority. Now the Self was alienated from God, governed by principles and ethics, bound together in relationships of mutual benefit with Others, and in a position of domination over the physical world. The effects of these two trends of social change are reflected in the modern and contemporary drama. According to Robert Brustein there are three main categories in modern and contemporary drama as “messianic, social, and existential” (16).

“Messianic drama occurs when the dramatis rebels against God and tries to take his place. Social drama occurs when the dramatist rebels against the conventions, morals, and values of social organism. Existential drama occurs when the dramatis rebels against the conditions of his existence.” (Ibid.) What the present study is concerned with opening is to expose human degradation and human corruption in modern and contemporary social drama. In the current language of psychology what the writer is seeking is an estimate of values, of changes in appreciation of what is worthwhile to humanity in modern

world. This judgment is not an easy one, because there are yet many people in western world who believe in human dignity, integrity, goodness, responsiveness, self-respect, and family organization. Therefore our generalization must be made with caution and truthfulness. This is particularly important when we attempt to include an entire society in one drama, and as we approach our own time, the quicker becomes the change in society. In regard to this judgment the present study points briefly to the social condition of life in the nineteenth-century and its definite effect on our time and then concerning the social drama, Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* will be taken into consideration.

SOCIAL CONDITION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the nineteenth century illiteracy became rarer with every decade. "The churches in contrast to the Catholic world of medievalism, made direct effort to bring religious conviction within the inner circle of the people's experience, and their motives were to prepare the people for their future, both in this temporal world and their destiny beyond the grave" (Findlay, 1960, p.139). This effort has still remained, but the social milieu has changed.

Man is valued since the humanist movement of the sixteenth century and the nineteenth century is supplemented by an increasing desire to give free play to the youngsters. There appeared the general tendency towards an ideal of freedom for everybody called "sentiment of democracy (Findlay, 1960, p.143)". As Rousseau has stated "that the child should be allowed to develop his natural powers, Wordsworth and other poets of his day gave an aesthetic interpretation to the same philosophy (Findlay, 1960, p.144)". Two trends of influence, one springing from love of liberty, the other from revolt against artifice and convention began to appear.

Every living organism desires self-expression, desires to do as it likes, but in a generation before it was assumed that this impulse must be repressed among human being until years of freedom were reached. Freedom to do as one like involves the risk of doing what is evil, of indulging self-regarding sentiments without restraint. The extension of this kind of freedom is a danger to democracy and it means confusion and anarchy. This revision of values in the society of the nineteenth century and its continuation in the twentieth century are the main sources that attract the modern and contemporary social dramatist's attention.

Now, we intend to discuss more profoundly how this abuse of freedom has operated on the minds of youths. "In the old days social conventions led the parents to have a warlike, hardy and disciplined attitude towards their children. In our new time a new convention has come to

be generally seen: our kindlier feelings toward the young lead us to allow our children all the enjoyment which is within their reach (Findlay, 1960, p.146)." It is obvious that the conflict between freedom and discipline cannot be resolved by any formula; if it is good for human being to be "free" it is also good that he should accept control and be trained to lead his desires in a right way. This training must be done through the mass media, the press, the church, the politicians, and the manufacturers in the educational problems, and the people should acquire the arts of self-government.

The nineteenth century with its new industrial system and its assumption of control over human development committed a capital crime. In the old days young children were about the place with father or mother or sister or servants, sometimes helping, sometimes working but always learning. After the Industrial Revolution, the young people were deprived of relationships with nature and had to find satisfaction in pictures and parks or in the cinemas; forbidden to employ their hands with wood and earth and tools. They came to despise manual labor and to look to clerical employment as a more worthy mode of life. Moreover, the city of the twentieth century needs inhabitants adapted to office, shop, warehouse, trades, most of which demand on the physical side far less muscular strength than their ancestors in the rural areas. The children brought up in this situation pay more attention to sex because of the freer treatment of sexual matters among their elders and in places of entertainment. Such freedom of license brings about difficulties that surround the society.

The crucial point in the disintegration of personality starts when the system makes the children work from their youth. In the old days the youth were always under control. The years of early adolescence up to eighteen were recognized as a period of development during which both home and church and industry combined to keep the inexperienced youth within bounds. But the young wage-earner is now emancipated. When girls and boys received wages they became independent, and when to this was added superficial attractions of the crowd, the music hall, the streets, the bars, etc. the result was extraordinary negative.

It seems to us that the worst evils of the Industrial Revolution have been displayed in the release of adolescence from that social control which civilization never abandoned until the nineteenth century. It is noticeable that after a few generations of boys and girls passing through these critical years with encouragement to independence, when grown to manhood, they find it hard to make a stable family by the perplexities which now confront them, and they lose the sense of duty towards the family life. These are the main points that cause the modern and contemporary social dramatists concentrate on man in society, in conflict with government, church and family.

MODERN SOCIAL DRAMA

Modern social drama started with Ibsen- the Norway playwright- as an intellectual protest against old fashioned moral and political ideas. Ibsen wrote *A Doll House* (1879) in defense of women's right and he was very optimistic about the social values of the future, while for Strindberg- the Swedish playwright - the matter of social problems was not so simple and he rejected the Ibsenic optimism. Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888) talks about a new type of woman in the nineteenth century as "half-woman" that represents the new mode of life:

The half-woman is a type who thrusts herself forward, selling herself nowadays for power, decorations, distinctions, diplomas, as formerly for money. The type implies degeneration it is not a good type and it does not endure; but it can unfortunately transmit its misery, and degenerate men seen instinctively to choose their mates from among such women, and so they breed, producing off spring of indeterminate sex to whom life is torture. (Strindberg, 81)

Ibsen thought that the fundamental human problems are solvable by reasonableness, but for Strindberg the matter was different and as a Naturalist he sought the cause in heredity, environment and history.

Eugene O'Neill – the American playwright - believed neither in Ibsenic optimism nor in Strindberg pessimism, for him "man's unhappiness was not simply the result of social maladjustment. The sorrows of our proud and angry dust are from eternity and are not merely the ignoble thing which pessimistic naturalism makes of them (Bently, 1952, p.282)." He needed a form which related man's relevance not merely to society but the universe which is larger than man and larger than human society.

Harold Pinter- the British dramatist- could have been influenced, or even aware of the philosophy of that originator of modern existentialist, Martin Heidegger, when he started to write his plays, or to formulate his ideas. All the more significant for Pinter, like Heidegger, is that man's confrontation with himself and the nature of his own being, predeterminations one's attitude towards society, or "the mode of a man's being determines his thinking (Esslin, 1970, p.35)." Pinter's *The Homecoming* is a sudden surprise about the corruption of family life in the western world.

Edward Albee –the American writer- in *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) refers to the corrupted "wave-of-the-future boys" in the American society who are going to take over.

Arthur Miller –the American writer- believes "home is where one starts from (Welland, 1960, p.112)." He sees the family as a microcosm that is related to the society. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) displays the sacrifice of the modern man to business and its effect on his family.

The use of scientific and philosophical ideas particularly Darwin's theory of heredity and environment, Emil Zola's concept of Naturalism, Nietzsche's radical demands for a total transformation of man's spiritual

life and along with it a declaration of the death of all Gods and traditional values, and Heidegger's philosophy of Existentialism are abundant in the modern and contemporary social dramas.

"Modern man is alone. The world turns into a domain of the absurd, while man writhes in solitude (Dubois-Dumee, 1947, p.269)". "Man is in agony (Marcel, 1951, p.17)." And as a final conclusion: "death is the most fitting possibility of existence. Being, addressed to it, reveals to existence its most inherent possibility of being as such (Heidegger, 1931, p.26)". These ideas are the pillars of the modern and contemporary social drama.

Modern and contemporary social drama displays the new society on the stage, and chooses its dramatic persona from the middle class. The middle class includes the vast majority of each society and it is their problems and their interests that attract the dramatist's attention.

In Ibsen's *A Doll's House* the personality of Nora, the main character, represents a middle class woman in society that Ibsen wants to make free from the conventional bondages. In Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, there is a kind of class struggle between the middle class character Jean and upper class character Miss Julie. In O'Neill's *The iceman Cometh* (1939) there is no prince or hero, but the bums, tarts and drunkards. In Pinter's *The Homecoming* a middle class family is introduced which has an immoral background in family life. In *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee represents the disintegration of personality in new generation. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* portrays the middle class family of Willy Loman who is in conflict with the salesman- ideal of success in a capitalist society. Hence, in modern and contemporary social drama, the hero has lost its traditional meaning, and he is a character like one of us who has no superiority to other men or women.

Modern and contemporary social drama is an attack on the abuses of the time, but it rarely suggests any clear alternative to the things the playwright would like to destroy, and leaves the judgment to the audience or critics. Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, at the end raises questions rather than gives answers. It comes to our mind, what Nora is going to do after leaving the house. How can she protect herself in society? What will happen to her children? Would she return home the next day? And many other questions. In Pinter's *The Homecoming*, Ruth as the wife of a university professor accepts to be a prostitute, but Pinter never says the reason and he leaves the judgment to the audience. Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* overemphasizes a man (Willy Loman) who has idealistic beliefs in finding a job in a capitalist system, but he never gives the remedy. Therefore, the modern and contemporary social dramatists are social anarchists that display a profound distaste for every form of modern organization.

PINTER'S HOMECOMING AND LACK OF COMMUNICATION AND IDENTITY

Harold Pinter takes as his starting point, in man's confrontation with himself and the nature of his own being, that fundamental anxiety which is nothing less than a living being's basic awareness of the threat of non-being, of annihilation. Pinter's people frightened are in a room. But what are they scared of? He himself answers: "Obviously, they are scared of what is outside the room, which is frightening... We are all in this, all in a room, and outside is a world which is most inexplicable and frightening, curious and altering"¹. Therefore, in Pinter's plays this fear is never a philosophical abstraction. It is, in fact, based on the experience of a Jewish boy in the East End of London, of a Jew in the European Hitler. In talking about his first play, *The Room* (1957), Pinter made this point of view very clearly: "This old woman is living in a room which, she is convinced, is the best in the house, and she refuses to know anything about the basement downstairs. She says it's damp and nasty and the world outside is cold and icy, and that in her warm and comfortable room her security is complete. But, of course, it isn't; an intruder comes to upset the balance of everything; in other words points to the delusion on which she is basing her life"². Pinter keeps the same attitude toward home in his later play, *The Birthday Party* (1958). But in *The Homecoming* (1965) the situation is reversed and room is no more a secure and warm place. The newcomers are not intruders; they are themselves victims, because victimizing occurs inside the room.

Pinter does not look back in anger. He sees man's fear not as an abstraction, not as a surreal dream, but as something real, ordinary and acceptable as an everyday occurrence. He acknowledges the influence of a number of writers such as Hemingway, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Henry Miller, Kafka and Becket. Of these he says Kafka and Becket had made the greatest impression on him. But whereas both Kafka and Becket are moving in a surreal world of acknowledged fantasy and dream, Pinter, essentially, remains on the firm ground of everyday reality, and the existence of action in Pinter's theater, causes it keeps distance from absurdity.

The starting point of *The Homecoming* is a real situation. There is action in the first scene. Max is in search of scissors and Lenny is reading newspaper. Max as the father of the family is living with two of his three sons: Lenny and Joey, and his brother Sam. Max is a retired butcher about seventy years old. He works as housewife and cooks and has to listen to a great deal of sarcasm about his cooking. Joey the youngest son is a boxer, and works in a firm. He is low of speech but his

strength and sexual potency is emphasized. Lenny is intelligent and at the start of the play his occupation is not clear. Sam, Max's brother, is a hire-car driver about sixty-three year old. The eldest son, Teddy, who has gone away from the house and is a professor at an American college returns back home with his wife, Ruth, in order to visit his family. After a few days he leaves his wife as a prostitute with the family and goes back alone to America. The play ends in absurdity. The audiences are confronted with the questions, why should Ruth as the mother of three children and the wife of an American college professor calmly accept an offer to leave herself set up as a prostitute?, or how could a husband not only consent to such an arrangement but actually put the proposition to his wife?

The real menace which lies behind the struggle for expression and communication, behind the violence, and behind all the menacing images is the uncertainty and unsafety of the human condition itself. So, when we cannot communicate, we want to know who we are, and we want to verify what is real and what is fantasy and the uncertainty is a source of terror. From the beginning of *The Homecoming*, Pinter manages to maintain an atmosphere of ambiguity, uncertainty around his characters. As great mystery seems to surround the personality of the now dead mother of the family, Jessie, and Sam somehow seems connected with this mystery.

Sam: I want to make something clear about Jessie, Max. I want to. I do. When I took her out in the cab, round the town, I was taking care of her, for you. I was looking after her for you, when you were busy, wasn't I? I was showing her the West End. Pause.

You wouldn't have trusted any of your other brothers. You wouldn't have trusted Mac, would you? But you trusted me. I want to remind you.

Pause.

Max: Why do I keep you here? You're just an old grub. (*The Homecoming*, 18)

Sam knows the full truth of Jessie's past, and that is why Max menaces him. In Pinter's world, when the characters are menaced, they cannot communicate. The inability to communicate, and to communicate in the correct terms can be regarded as an expression of the mood, the unhappiness of the life, and the tragedy of the human condition. For example, Lenny and Joey treat their father extremely badly. Max in turn is too rude to his brother, Sam. Lenny's story about the beating up of a diseased prostitute reveals his profession to Ruth. There are all the signs of tension in their family life.

Pinter makes it clear that in life human being rarely makes use of language for true communication. Silence, for Pinter, is an essential part and often the climax of his use of language. "There are two types of silences. One

¹ Pinter interviewed by Kenneth Tynan in the Series People Today, B.B.C. Home Service, 28th October 1960.

² Pinter interviewed by John Sherwood, B.B.C. Europe Service, 3rd March 1960.

when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is employed"³. This torrent of language happens when Lenny wants to answer Ruth's question.

Lenny: [...] Do you mind if I hold your hand?

Ruth: Why?

Lenny: I'll tell you why (*The Homecoming*, 30).

And then he tries to say two long stories. "This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it that is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of what we don't hear"⁴.

When characters cannot communicate, they try to verify what is real and unreal. As soon as, Max meets Ruth for the first time, he gets angry and says; "Who asked you to bring tarts in here?" (*The Homecoming*, 41). He does not want to hear Teddy's explanation that Ruth is his wife.

Max: I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died. My word of honor [...] Take that disease away from me. Great her away from me" (41).

In the second act of *The Homecoming*, Ruth sees herself as a passive object of male desires. That is the significance of her speech about herself as a moving object in response to the discussion about the real nature of a table. Having failed in her marriage and being used as an object, Ruth is in complete despair which is fully understandable, and motivates her behavior completely. We can see the character of Ruth before her marriage as a real person who had an identity. She says; "I was [...] different [...] when I met Teddy [...] first" (50). "I was a model for the body. A photographic model for the body" (57). That can be regarded as an art. It is after her marriage that she changes to a passive object; first by her husband, Teddy, and then by the other members of the family as a prostitute.

Ruth does not like the life of a college professor's wife. She describes America as an arid desert that, "it's all rock. And sand [...] And there's lots of insects there." (53) The sterile surroundings that Ruth has a deep emotional voids in, can be compared with T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Her husband, Teddy, wants her to help him with his lectures when they get back to America. These are indeed, the signs of the fact that her marriage to Teddy is on the point of breakdown. This would be a very believable motivation for the sudden and unannounced trip to Venice. The probability is that this trip did not produce the desired result. Ruth's refusal to go up to the bedroom with Teddy on her first arrival in the house could be seen in the light of her reluctance to be exposed to what might have become a tedious or unsatisfactory sexual relationship.

Joy like Lenny has the morality of pimps and rapists. In the second act when Teddy comes downstairs with his and Ruth's luggage. He asks her to go. But Lenny suggests a dance, just before she leaves. He puts a record on the

radiogram, the dance, he kisses her. At this point Max and Joey return from the gym where Joey has been training. Joey takes Ruth from Lenny's arms, sits on the sofa with her, and embraces and kisses her. Max, who was so shocked about Ruth when he first met her, is completely casual about her behavior. He assures Teddy that he need not have been ashamed when he married Ruth and praises her beauty and quality. Ruth's behavior in the presence of Teddy could be the sign of breakdown in their family life.

At the end of *The Homecoming*, at the moment of Teddy's departure Ruth takes revenge on him by surrounding to suggestion being used as a prostitute, and by calling him "Eddie". Throughout the play Ruth has never addressed Teddy as "Eddie". Presumably a private nickname indicating a moment of intimacy. Talking to the others she has referred to him as Teddy. The fact that she now calls him by a different name, the name which no doubt was the one she used when they were alone, thus acquires a particular force. But having turned and having waited Teddy is greeted with silence. Pinter indicates a pause. Then Ruth merely says; "Don't become a stranger", and thus returns his dehumanizing attitude towards the members of his family. Ruth here uses Teddy as an object, and this is the moment of release of dramatic tension. It is the moment of self-realization, and it is, in fact, Ruth who has come back home.

CONCLUSION

In modern and contemporary social drama women assume the central role, and they have attracted the social dramatists' attention more than men. After the Industrial Revolution women have grown up to be conscious of their powers and determined to establish a new status, and this change was implied in the evolution of society. The women are remarkable, as compared with men in social welfare, and they are by original nature more public spirited; more self-sacrificing than their partners of the opposite sex, and women stand closer to children, and are commonly more ready to protect and provide for them.

Modern and contemporary social drama has a harsh, condemnatory, and penetrating tone that is against any hypocritical sentimentality and never wants to draw tears from the audience. The modern and contemporary social dramatist is not against social progress, but he is more skeptical about the modern human organization. He is dealing more with the fact and realities of the modern society than with the appearances. He believes true values determine a healthy and strong society. These values must be learned and practiced.

The central motif of the modern and contemporary social drama is the concept of man's fate and humanity

³ Pinter, speech to the Seventh National Student Drama Festival in Bristol, Sunday Times, London 4th March 1962

⁴ Pinter, speech to the Seventh National Student Drama Festival in Bristol

in our time. Generally, by focusing on life, Modern and contemporary social drama causes man to realize his personality, his inner world, and his problems, to understand other men and to overcome his limitations and weak points of his life.

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