



CONTEMPORARY THEATRE IN ENGLISH

WORKSHEET 3 – HAROLD PINTER'S *THE HOMECOMING* (1965)

Preliminaries

1. What is your general reaction to the play? Did you like/dislike it? Why, in each case? Do you find it controversial, and if so, why? Try to articulate your thoughts while looking for an answer and be as explicit as possible.
2. Is *The Homecoming* a naturalistic/social-realist play? Which of the paradigms studied would best define the play?
3. What are the most immediate socio-political contexts to the play? What movements developed in the western world in the 1960s and what major events took place in Europe and the US? Could the fact that the play was written shortly before the second wave of feminism fully developed be of any significance? Does the play in any way anticipate the feminist revolution?
4. How was the play received when it first opened in London?
5. What are the implications in the use of the title?

Dramaturgical Strategies

1. In terms of formal experimentation, which elements would you identify as being particularly relevant, and why?
2. How is the play structured? How does the specific dramatic shape used contribute to the creation of meaning?
3. Discuss the use of character in the play and the effect achieved through its specific treatment.
4. One of the most experimental elements in the play is the use of language, which distances Pinter and *The Homecoming* significantly from other plays of the period (see, for example, C.W.E. Bigsby, 1981). Why and how does language become the main tool of defamiliarisation and how does the play dramatise the way in which language mediatises reality? How does this affect gender? You may find Deborah Sarbin's article "‘I Decided She Was’: Representation of Women in *The Homecoming*" (1989) useful. In connection with this, consider the use of pauses

and silences in the play and discuss the ways in which they contribute to the creation of meaning.

5. Read the conversation between Teddy and Ruth attentively (from immediately after the first blackout, to the moment Ruth leaves and Teddy is left alone, just before Lenny comes in) and describe the main stages in the verbal struggle between the two characters. Watch the moment in Peter Hall's filmed version of the play (1973) and discuss its rendering of the scene.

6. Read the conversation between Lenny and Ruth attentively (from the moment Ruth returns from her walk, to when she goes upstairs) and describe the main stages in the verbal struggle between the two characters. Watch the moment in Hall's filmed version and discuss its rendering of the scene.

7. One possible way to approach *The Homecoming* is from the fields of gender and sexuality. In this respect, look for information about the terms 'patriarchy', 'male homosocial desire' and the 'exchange of women' paradigm. In what way/s could they be applied to the play? You might find Mireia Aragay's article "Exploring Gender Roles in the 60s: Ann Jellicoe's *The Knack* and Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*" (1994) useful.

8. Think about the male characters in the play. Do they form a harmonious whole or are there any tensions between them? If the latter, what kind of tensions?

9. Read the opening conversation between Max and Lenny attentively (from the beginning to the moment Sam arrives) and describe the main stages in the verbal struggle between the two characters. What strategies does Max follow in order to reinforce his position of authority? Watch the exchange in Hall's filmed version and discuss its rendering of the scene.

10. Think about the female characters in the play and the similarities/differences between them. How are they represented? Do they occupy subject positions or are they othered/objectified by the male characters? In this respect, analyse the way language is used to construct and assign gender roles by discussing the way in which Jessie and Ruth are constructed by the males in the play.

11. Analyse the exchange between the characters at the end of act I – from the moment Teddy and Ruth come down for breakfast, to the end of the act – describing the main stages in the verbal struggle between the characters. Watch Hall's filmed version and discuss its rendering of the scene.

12. Analyse the 'proposal' scene in act II, when Teddy conveys to Ruth the family's invitation to stay in the house, and Ruth's attitude through it. Watch Hall's filmed version and discuss its rendering of the scene.

13. In his book *The Theatre of Harold Pinter* (2014), Mark Taylor-Batty states that the play is centrally concerned with "the male presumption of a right to define, construct and own women, and female strategies of resistance that include taking control of the vocabulary of

that male discourse” (p. 88). Do you agree with his view? In your reasoning, think of particular examples from act II that illustrate this reading of the play.

14. Discuss the use of the stage picture. What are its most defining elements and what implications do they have?

15. Read the ending of the play, from the moment Teddy leaves the house. How can it be understood and in what ways does it represent Ruth’s ‘homecoming’? Then, watch Hall’s filmed version and discuss its rendering of the scene, paying particular attention to the use of space.

16. According to Taylor-Batty, “Pinter seems to be trying to do something more than shock for the sake of it, and one concern might be to again foreground the discourses of interaction between the genders” (p. 93). He also adds that “the manner in which a woman’s domestic duties and status vis-à-vis men are culturally inscribed are foregrounded, but here they are tested, and vulnerabilities exploited by Ruth” (p. 93). Do you agree with his reading of the play? In the light of the above, would you consider *The Homecoming* a feminist play?

Reference List

- Aragay, M. (1994). Exploring Gender Roles in the 60s: Ann Jellicoe’s *The Knack* and Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming*. *Atlantis* 16(1-2), 5-19.
- Bigsby, C.W.E. (1981). The Language of Crisis in British Theatre: The Drama of Cultural Pathology. In C.W.E. Bigsby (Ed.), *Contemporary Drama in English* (pp. 11-51). London: Edward Arnold.
- Sarbin, D.A. (1989). ‘I Decided She Was’: Representation of Women in *The Homecoming*. *The Pinter Review: Annual Essays*, 34-42.
- Taylor-Batty, M. (2014). *The Theatre of Harold Pinter* (pp. 70-94). London and New York: Bloomsbury.

Visual Material

- Hall, P. [Director]. (1973). *The Homecoming*. United Kingdom, United States: Seven Keys, American Film Theatre.