

# THE PLAY BETWEEN ID, EGO, AND SUPEREGO IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE HOMECOMING*: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL READING

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Received: 14 March 2020 Revised and Accepted: 8 July 2020

**ABSTRACT:** The aftermath of World War one left a sense of hopelessness and discomfort in Britain and other parts of the world. Literary works of Modern era encapsulate that sense of loss. A psychoanalytical reading of Modern age works highlights the effects of the war on psyche of the people. In this work, *The Homecoming* has been analyzed from a psychoanalytical perspective, using theories of Sigmund Freud. The play between id, ego and superego are looked at in this paper in terms of the behavior of the characters. The paper also analyzes evidences of manifestation of Oedipus complex in the major characters of the play. Harold Pinter's unconscious mind, and how that slips into the text has also been looked at.

**KEYWORDS:** Psychoanalysis, Harold Pinter, Modern drama, Oedipus complex, Psyche

## I. INTRODUCTION

"Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar", said Sigmund Freud, but a reading of Freudian texts would not let us take this statement at face value. "Freud was a heavy cigar smoker" and it was out of this vested interest that he made the statement, as Peter Barry suggests in his book *Beginning Theory*. [1] Harold Pinter's Modern play, *The Homecoming*, is layered with phallic symbols, including a mention of cigarettes and cigars. Various aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis can be applied to Pinter's play, as it has both overt and covert evidences of play between id, ego and superego; Oedipal fixation towards the mother/ mother figure and Oedipal complex; Freudian slips of tongue, phallic symbols, puns; sibling rivalry as well as its developed version, professional rivalry; psycho-biography of the author; and imageries. In this paper, we will be looking at each aspect one by one.

## II. PINTER'S PSYCHE AND THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Just like Teddy, Pinter stayed away from his home for a couple of years. In his presentation of Teddy as a character, somewhere personal touch comes in. Teddy was an intellectual, who failed to fit in the British society. There are more similarities between the two. Teddy's wife Ruth was a photographic model of body. Pinter's first wife, Vivien Merchant was an actress, whom he later divorced. In an interview, when Pinter was asked about the symbolism in his plays, he says, "I have never been conscious of allegorical significance in my plays." [2] However, unconsciously, his vast knowledge of the Biblical and classical allusions, secure a place in his works. Art doesn't stem from vacuum. Pinter's readings, society he had lived in, his familial background, et al influence his work consciously or unconsciously. One cannot separate the characters from the author. As Sigmund Freud wrote in his essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming", "The creative writer does the same as the child at play" and "creates a world of phantasy". [3] The play itself can be seen as an outcome of the day-dreaming on the part of the author.

## III. PHALLIC SYMBOLS

The very first sentence of the stage directions in the play begins with Lenny, the second child of Max carrying "a pencil in his hand." Max is also present there with a "stick". Stick and pencil here are phallic symbols, where the father and his son are trying to establish their phallic authority. When Max fails to maintain control over his child, he covertly tries to threaten him with castration, as the symbols like "scissors", or the use of words like, "I'll chop your...off...Talking to your filthy father like that!" suggest. Max's profession as a butcher hints on the same castration complex Max failed to inculcate in his sons, who openly challenge his paternal authority. Max takes out "a crumpled cigarette" from his pocket, which could either imply his attempt to assert Oedipal authority over his irreverent sons by hinting to them what he could do their pleasure point, or it could mean

Max's failure to assert that authority over his sons, who in turn use cuss words in addressing him. Lenny's lines "Oh, Daddy, you're not going to use your stick on me, are you? Eh? Don't use your stick on me Daddy. No, please... I haven't done anything wrong, dad, honest." in the play imply that whenever Max is talked to disrespectfully by any of his sons, Max tries to make the law of his penis prevail, by trying to establish castration complex in them.

When Teddy returns with his wife to his home from America after a gap of six whole years, the key he had works on the lock. Key is again a phallic symbol here. So is the glass which Lenny offers to Ruth in the later segment of the play. The glass becomes a means to assert dominance, as Richard M. Coe suggests. [4] From the "cheese roll" prepared by Lenny is taken by Teddy, to the knife in Max's hand are all phallic symbols. Just like the first Act, the second Act begins with the famous phallic symbol, "cigar".[5] Max and his three sons are carrying cigars in their hands, when Ruth, the mother figure enters with cups of coffee which she offers to them. Cups, milk, coffee, caves, rooms, and enclosures in buildings represent female imagery. Suffocation that Ruth felt inside the four-walls of Teddy's house initially, implies the discomfort she feels in the house full of men, and a potential attack on her sexuality. However, eventually she comes to terms with it, and it is Teddy who tries to convince her in vain to leave the same house she felt uncomfortable in.

#### IV. ID, EGO, AND SUPEREGO

In the play, *The Homecoming* characters are in their primitive state, that is only id, the pleasure principal prevails, and there are no morality or reality principles, superego and ego respectively, at function. They follow only the dictates of their instincts. Max even had "an instinctive understanding of animals" as he claims. Even the other members of the family "walk in [t]here every time of the day and night like bloody animals." Teddy's defense for his family in front of Ruth "They're my family. They're not ogres." is followed by a "pause" which undercuts his attempt to give human attributes to his family. As per the anthropocentric view of animals, the family follows its pleasure instincts. They are "fillies" and "horses". Leonard and Joey openly abuse their father, who in turn uses even more derogatory language for his sons, as well as for his late wife, Jessie and daughter-in-law, Ruth, who he meets for the first time. Joey and Lenny unhesitatingly make out with Ruth in front of her husband, who is their elder brother. There are no moral grounds when it comes to sexuality, as Max says, any woman who gets associated with any of the male members of the family "can keep us all happy." Or as Teddy says, "...wall across there... with a door. We knocked it down...years ago...to make an open living area." All walls and boundaries have been knocked down in the family. There is no concept of privacy, particularly, with respect to sexuality, as they openly make love in the living area. "Every single bit of the moral code they live by was taught to them by their mother", with whose death died the moral order in the family. The only character who seemingly follows the morality and reality principle is the younger brother of Max, Sam who "doesn't bang women" in his car. Terry Eagleton, in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction* mentions, "Every human being has to undergo this repression of what Freud named the 'pleasure principle' by the 'reality principle'" and the "modern society had become tyrannical in its repressiveness." [6] This reflects in Sam's participation in the Second World War. The other characters are driven by 'Eros', the sexual drive while Sam is driven by 'Thanatos' or the death drive.

Super-ego that is governed by the morality principle has been subsided by id. When Teddy and Ruth return home, the former remarks, "...wall across there...with a door. We knocked it down...years ago...to make an open living area." Wall and doors symbolize boundaries that had been knocked down. Only id is in play in the house. They are open about sexuality and even share their partners among themselves. Lenny asks Ruth if she wants "aperitif", an alcoholic drink that is taken before meal to increase appetite. Appetite may hint at sexual appetite that Lenny wants her to develop. Bernard F. Dukore, in his paper "What's in a Name?: An Approach to *The Homecoming*" suggests that Ruth could represent the Biblical Ruth "whose husband's people became her people". [7] There is a mention of dream within the play. Lenny is uncomfortable, and fails to secure a peaceful sleep. When Teddy asks him if he had a bad dream, he says, "No, I wouldn't say I was dreaming. It's not exactly a dream. It's just that something keeps waking me up." As per Freudian theories of interpretation of dream, dreams are comprised of repressed feelings, desires, and fears. Dreams give one a peak into the unconscious mind that comes under the territory of id. Lenny's insomnia can be seen as a case of neurosis. [8].[9].[10].[11]

#### V. OEDIPAL FIXATION

M.W. Rowe, in her article "Pinter's Freudian Homecoming" suggests that the "all-male family" in the play suffers from a "mother fixation". They get attracted only to women who have a semblance to their mother. The classic Madonna-Whore complex prevails in all three sons of Teddy and Jessie. Jessie died way before the sons could have arrived adolescence, therefore a "damaging, idealized image of her" lives on, as Peter Barry points out. Max's lines in Act II imply the same, "Since poor Jessie died, eh, Sam? We haven't had a woman in the

house. Not one...Because their mother's image was so dear any other woman would have...tarnished it." This "mother image" is actually the mother-fixation Freud wrote about in his essay "The most prevalent form of degradation in erotic life". [12] Teddy could marry only woman who he thinks could be degraded sexually, so as to make her different from his mother, but at the same time one who is similar to his mother. Thomas Postlewait rightly suggests in his essay "Pinter's *The Homecoming*", that Teddy, Hamlet and Oedipus Rex, all struggle with the double identity of women as Madonna/whore. Therefore he chose Ruth, the "photographic model for the body." All three sons and their father are equally attracted to Ruth, as she is the mother figure they all have been yearning for.

In the absence of the mother, Jessie, Max takes the place of mother figure. He takes up all conventionally feminine household chores such as cooking, cleaning, bathing children and so forth. He even claims to have "suffered the pain...the pain of childbirth..." He asks other members of the family, "Who do you think I am, your mother? Eh?" Even his cigarette is "crumpled" which signifies the paternal authority he fails to maintain, as cigarette is a symbol of phallus.

Another important thing to notice while giving the play an Oedipal reading, is to look at Jessie's attachment towards her eldest son, Teddy. Sam tells him, "You were always your mother's favorite. She told me. It's true...you were always the main object of her love." It should not bring any surprise that Ruth, the woman who is the new mother figure in the family also chose to marry Teddy out all three sons. With Oedipal fixation also comes the Oedipal complex, which means the fear of castration by the father that a child experiences when he learns that the mother belongs to his father, and he changes his object of desire from mother to some other woman. Castration symbols used by Max, like "scissors", "knife", "chop[ping]" and so on show Max's attempt to inculcate castration complex in his sons.

#### VI. FREUDIAN SLIPS, PUNS, AND OTHER EVIDENCES

Lenny has just introduced himself to Ruth, but she addresses him as Leonard, which implies perhaps they have met before. Ruth is a body model, and Lenny being a pimp, could have met her before in the prostitution business. Ruth was not supposed to say this in the house, but it slips out from her tongue. The few "pennies" Ruth would need is a pun on 'penis'. Freudian "sibling rivalry" is evident in both the generations. Teddy, Lenny and Joey as well Sam and Max experience it. Sam's sibling rivalry takes form of "professional rivalry", when he compares himself with other taxi drivers in the town. Lenny comments on the same sibling rivalry by saying, "What led you to be so...vindictive against your own brother?" There is also an evidence of Lacanian "mirror-stage" in the play, when Joey looks into the mirror and does shadowboxing. They also talk about the "known" and "unknown" which could be read as the "conscious" and the "unconscious". The play has two hundred and one pauses, twenty silences and numerous eclipses within it, which bring in light the uncomfortable topics touched upon and the internal fears of characters. Alice Rayner calls these "infamous pauses, excruciating silences, and the proclivity for tableaux" as instances of delay, and these pauses and silences suggest discomfort. [13].[14]

The play is phallogocentric in its language as well as in theme. As Ruth points out how her lips move, and it is this lip movement which is paid attention to, rather than the words that come out from her mouth. Ruth is portrayed as a "tease", who could be a "hysterical" woman. [15] Her past occupation as a photographic model is a euphemism for prostitute, as Martin Esslin wrote. The play is centered round her sexuality. For Sigmund Freud, female sexuality was a "dark continent", and so is Ruth's sexuality a dark continent as per the men in the family. [16] Ruth's name itself could be a pun on "roots", to which the family is going back, and the title *The Homecoming* implies Teddy's and Ruth's homecoming. Roots also suggest primitiveness, which can be likened to id.

#### VII. INCESTUOUS INSTINCTS

Stepping into the shoes of their uncles, or perhaps biological fathers, Sam and MacGregor, Lenny and Joey make sexual advances towards their sister-in-law Ruth. While the former have had secret affairs with Max's wife, her sons Lenny and Joey repeat the family history by following the similar forbidden incestuous instincts. Instincts are important to the family, as the father Max points out, "I had an instinctive understanding of animals". They are no less than animals, as they follow the dictates of their id, or the pleasure principle. The mutual sense of possession of the female members of the family isn't restricted to Max and Teddy's wife. In the beginning of the play when Max talks about the marital status of his younger brother Sam, he tells him to let the family know once he finds the right girl, as "she can keep us all happy". He goes on to say, "We'd take it in turns..." They give no qualms about sharing the women among themselves. Even Sam claims to have "escorted" Max's wife once or twice. The family openly uses the terms of the body and other sexual

innuendoes. Max unhesitatingly mentions how his brother Sam had been “banging” lady customers, and gave them “a good bang on the back seat”.

### VIII. MOTHER FIGURE

In the absence of the actual mother, Max performed all household chores and asks if he was their mother. It is Ruth, who later in the play replaces Jessie by filling in the void the latter had left with her absence. Max takes on the stereotypical feminine role, as he claims, “I have given birth to three grown men” and bore the “pain of childbirth”. He even went ahead to claim that he gave “the best bleeding years” of his life to his wife. Bleeding years stand for the fertile years of a woman’s biological anatomy, between puberty to menopause. Jessie, who had a reputation of being an adulterous woman, has been replaced by Ruth now. Max hints that she was a “whore”. When he sees Ruth, he says, “I’ve never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died...” The line “ever since your mother died”, that was added to the sentence is interesting. It shows he has had whores under the roof of the house, but none after Jessie died. It’s Jessie who has been given the credit for morality of the three sons. [17] “She taught them all the morality they know.”, as Max says. Max’s reception of Ruth wasn’t positive initially but later in the play he reminds his sons that she wasn’t “someone off the streets” but his “daughter-in-law”.

### IX. RELIVING THE PAST: THE HOME COMING

The title of the play is interesting, as what makes a house a home is the members of the family. Father and mother are the important parts of the family structure. The play is entitled as ‘homecoming’, as in coming back to home after an exile. As Joseph Hynes writes in his piece, “Pinter and Morality”, the title of the play brings back memories. [18] It is about the exile of Teddy, who returns to Britain from the U.S. In the play, Sam mentions, that it’s “our father’s house” but then he corrects his stance by calling it “our mother’s house”. In the all-male family, the mother figure played an important role in the lives of the three sons. The past for Max’s family isn’t cherishable. In Act II of the play Max says, “Who cares? Listen, live in the present, what are you worrying about? I mean, don’t forget the earth’s about five thousand million years old, at least. Who can afford to live in the past?” The dialogue about present and past shows Max’s anxiety around the past.

The home Teddy and Ruth come back to is locked but the two get an entry into it easily. The old key that the two had works perfectly well.

Teddy: Well, the key worked.

*Pause.*

They haven’t changed the lock.

*Pause.*

The pauses in the play are like the sound of silence. They are loaded with meaning. The home is still the same. The old key and lock symbolize that the state of affairs are still the same at their home. The family is still governed by the pleasure principle. They are still animalistic, and in a want of a woman. Even the rooms have not changed. Teddy’s room is as it is. Reading between the lines, we find out that Teddy was expecting things to be different. He expected things to have changed for the better but to his disappointment, everything is still the same. Key and lock are famous sexual imageries. Entry into the home also suggests walking down the memory lane of childhood. Formative years are the most important part of one’s life. The characters in the play get to re-live those childhood days, as the history repeats itself. Teddy comes home with his wife but leaves alone, as he doesn’t feel at home at his home.

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