

## Ruth's Homecoming into the Patriarchal Register

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**Abstract:** The Homecoming is one of Pinter's most famous plays involved in power and gender. This paper, while probing into the role of not only Ruth but also Teddy and Lenny who play important roles in the power competition in this play, aims to explore the true nature of Ruth's homecoming, that is, her homecoming into the patriarchal register.

**Keywords:** Pinter; The Homecoming; Power competition; Gender; Patriarchy

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The Homecoming, the two-act play by Harold Pinter, was written in 1964 and first published in 1965. Among later researches on it, quite a few of them focus on Ruth, and claim that she is the one who comes home, winning dominance in the house and gaining her own freedom. Arthur Ganz, for example, argues that Ruth, with full strength of the sexual impulse, becomes a dominator of not only the sexuality of the men, but also of all those brutal and hostile impulses (187). William J. Free indicates that she will probably not follow the contract to become a prostitute (4). And according to Thomas P. Adler, Ruth has claimed a position of queen, with other characters being her pimp, her child, and her dying father and lover, thus restoring to the fullness of her womanhood (382). All of the studies above seem to believe that Ruth is the one who, with her sexual power as well as her wit, gains final dominance and achieves her freedom. However, they seem to overstate Ruth's power of sexuality, considering it a kind of panacea for Ruth to solve problems and gain power, and exaggerate the freedom she obtains.

These opinions probably have a close relation to one of Pinter's interviews in which he says, "She does not become a harlot. . . . At the end of the play she is in possession of a certain kind of freedom. . . . it is not at all certain she will go off to Greek Street" (qtd. in Prentice 458). However, by such words as "a certain kind of" and "not at all certain", Pinter actually leaves space for other interpretations for Ruth's final condition. So Gene Fendt shows his doubts about the freedom Ruth gains: "Is it not absurd to think that Ruth has a choice, or that she can choose, or even act in that supposed thoroughly absurd world?" (60) Ruth, through her decision to stay in the house in London, does obtain partial freedom for herself, that is, freeing herself from her indifferent husband and her unhappy marriage, but as for the future life in London, to say that she is the total dominator of herself as well as other characters is inappropriate. Therefore, my claim is that Ruth is not the true dominator in the power competition as well as in the house, and the freedom she gains also turns out to be transient and will fade out quickly in the future.

Firstly, there is evidence demonstrating that Teddy is probably the true dominator during the whole play, manipulating the plot of leaving his wife to his father and brothers. At the very beginning when he and Ruth appear, he has already shown his unusual agitation. That lies not only in his repeated words and questions, but also his being "wide awake" and willingness to "stay up for a bit" (22). It seems that something more exciting for him than coming back home after six years stirs him and requires him more time to think about. Besides, he introduces the house to Ruth, and consoles her by beautifying his family members, and introducing to her his former room. All those words are extremely patient consolations, yet disregarding if she is really interested in those things. He teaches those things to her, with ignorance of her will, so minutely that it seems she will live there for not "a few days" (22) but quite a long time. After she replies that she will have "a breath of air", he turns out to be abnormally uneasy and disapproval: "Air?" "What do you mean?" (23) "At this time of night?" "But what am I going to do?" "Why do you want a breath of air?" (24) These questions not only show his indifference to Ruth's demands as a human being, and his egocentricity, but further explain his unusual agitation which starts at the very beginning. What's more, he even peeps out of the window at his wife after she goes out, "half turns from the window, stands, suddenly chews his knuckles" (24). What is it that keeps bothering him ever since the beginning? Is he being afraid of Ruth running away and failing him to complete his plot? And during the whole sexual act of Ruth and his brothers, Teddy, as her husband, stands aside like an observer, and even offers, like a representative, to tell Ruth the family's plan of keeping her in the house (75). When he leaves, he closes the door without any touch of lingering or worry about his wife. He finally achieves his whole task. There is no need to wear the disguise. That is probably why Pinter says that ". . . if ever there was a villain in the play, Teddy was it" (qtd. in Dukore 177).

Second, Lenny turns out to be the one who gains dominance during the whole play, and will not let Ruth claim the position of ruling. After deciding to let Ruth stay with them, it is Lenny who comes up with the question, "where's the money going to come from" (Pinter 70). After that, it is he who reminds others that Ruth is "not a woman who likes walking around in second-hand goods"

(71), pulling her to an image of demanding high expenses. Then while others are still arguing where the money will come from due to his reminding, it is he who suggests “Why don’t I take her up with me to Greek Street?” (72). The discussion has been controlled by Lenny, and finally goes along the way he is willing to see, that is, to take advantage of Ruth as a prostitute to earn profit, and at the same time making her the family’s company and housewife. In the end, Max doubts, “I’ve got a funny idea she’ll do the dirty on us” (81). Is it possible that Lenny, being the manipulator of taking advantage of Ruth for profits, does not consider it and corresponding measures to prevent her from ruining his plan? Ganz indicates that the posture of his standing and watching at the end of the play is one of a bewildered man who is wholly under the control of Ruth’s dominant power (187), yet it is more like a posture of contemplation of how to force Ruth to be a whore for profits. According to the discussion above, Lenny turns out to be the one who leads the direction to what he wants. And as the true dominator in the house, he will not let his plot go in vain.

Since Ruth is not the true dominator in this power competition, her freedom, therefore, turns out to be transient. Ruth, while ostensibly getting rid of her unhappy marriage and indifferent husband, and regaining partial freedom before marriage, has actually stepped into a worse trap. She probably senses that she is not the one who dominates, so that she keeps playing the game of negotiation, trying to obtain more to meet her demands of a comfortable life as well as the sense of security. With the appliance of such business-like attitude, she has put up a hypocritical commercial disguise on the indecent event, circumscribing it in a seemingly calm and formal circle of transaction, and makes sure that the game of negotiation will not irritate the men to quit the game. Therefore, she claims things less important for the men such as food, wine, a house with more rooms, and a maid, but never touches the central term of the contract which demands her to be a whore, mother and housewife at the same time, or we may guess, she dares not put forward a dissenting opinion to harm the core demands of men.

What’s more, there is still a doubt whether or not she can finally obtain what she claims from men. After the bargaining of the flat of rooms, the answers of Lenny for her demands change to “all conveniences”, “we’d supply everything. Everything you need”, “you’d have everything” (77), “naturally”, and “of course” (78). He answers without hesitation, and there is no more bargaining and reluctance in his replies. After all, who would argue for money he decides not to spend? Those things Ruth claims at last turn out to be illusory baits of the men to lure her to stay. As a woman with no work, her sexual power over others cannot always work and keep its magic to control men. And as long as she needs to depend on men to obtain things she wants, through the employment of her body and sacrifice of her will, there will never be true freedom to her, and she will still be under the shadow of man’s dominance.

Therefore, *The Homecoming* is not a play of a woman who gains her true freedom. Ruth, through her decision to leave her husband and stay in the house in London, does make a courageous step to gain her freedom, freeing herself from the bondage of her indifferent husband and unhappy marriage. However, being not the one who truly claims dominance, her freedom also turns out to be a phony one and will sooner or later vanish. Ruth, through the employment of her sexuality and the sale of her body, sacrifices her future freedom for transient freedom at present, and actually steps into a worse life. *The Homecoming*, which represents Ruth’s compromise to men, is not a work in which “the matriarch has displaced the patriarch” (Berlin 392), but Ruth’s homecoming into patriarchal register.

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