



**Harold  
Pinter**

**The  
Homecoming**

# STUDY GUIDE

## Harold Pinter

Harold Pinter was born in London on October 10, 1930. He spent his childhood in the working-class multi-cultural neighborhood of the East End. The ethnic turf wars of his neighborhood intensified with the arrival of Oswald Mosley's Fascists and their attacks on local Jews. At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Pinter was evacuated to the country like many other London children. These two events became major influences on his work, which often deals with violent struggles for dominance. After the war he received an acting scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, but left after two terms. In 1948, upon reaching draft age, Pinter declared himself a conscientious objector. Although he had no religious beliefs, he later explained: "I was aware of the suffering and of the horror of war, and by no means was I going to subscribe to keeping it going."

Pinter's writing career began in 1950, when two of his poems were published by Poetry London Magazine. During the 1950's he assumed the stage name David Baron and acted in various regional repertory companies. At this time, Pinter met actress Vivien Merchant who he married in 1956. In 1958 his first major play, **The Birthday Party**, premiered in London to universally bad reviews. The Evening Standard wrote "Sorry, Mr. Pinter, you're just not funny enough" and the play closed after one week.

In 1959 Pinter's drama **The Caretaker** had its first London performance and in 1961 opened to rave reviews in New York. During the 1960's Pinter also proved his talent for film: his screenplay The Servant was awarded the British Screenwriters' Guild Award and The Pumpkin Eater won a British Film Academy Award for Best Screenplay. In 1965 **The Homecoming** had its London premiere, and the Sunday Times called it "Pinter's cleverest play". The following year he was awarded the C.B.E. (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) by Queen Elizabeth. **The Homecoming** transferred to New York in 1967 where it won the Tony Award and the Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play.

In 1973 Pinter was appointed Associate Director of the newly-formed National Theatre. However, his professional success was marred by the public scandal of his affair with Lady Antonia Fraser, the wife of a Member of Parliament, and his subsequent divorce from Vivien Merchant. Ironically, his next play **Betrayal** (1978) dealt with adultery in London's literary circle. After the New York premiere of **Betrayal** in 1980, he married Fraser. Pinter continued to write for film and in 1982 his adaptation of The French Lieutenant's Woman was nominated for an Academy Award. Since then he has continued to focus on screenplays, his most recent being The Comfort of Strangers.

### The Homecoming

Harold Pinter's third major play takes place in a run-down house in London. The house is occupied by Max, an ex-butcher, his brother Sam and two of his sons -- Joey, a would-be boxer and Lenny, a pimp. Max rules the household with a iron hand, bullying his family verbally and occasionally attacking them with his stick. One night, his eldest son Teddy, a philosophy professor, arrives unannounced from America with his wife Ruth whom they have never met. The arrival of a woman into this all male household is the catalyst for a spiraling chain of family bickering and sexual intrigue. The climax of the **The Homecoming** is the revelation that Ruth was a prostitute before she married Teddy, and the play concludes with the family asking Ruth to stay behind in London after Teddy leaves.

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**The Homecoming** deals with several common Pinter themes: a violent struggle for power; a lack of communication (or rather, people trying not to communicate and failing); and the revelation of man's essential brutality underneath the thin veneer of civilization.

While growing up, Pinter witnessed the ethnic clashes of the East End, World War II and the Holocaust. Their influence can often be found in the violent conflicts in his plays. Although Max's children are adult, only Teddy has moved out of the house. This leaves Lenny and Joey in an adolescent tug-of-war with their father: why should Max treat them as adults if they live under his roof and he cooks and

cleans for them? There is no doubt of the love in the family, but the inability to express it results in anger. Max uses his sons' stunted emotional growth to maintain his control -- a position that is threatened by Ruth. In his book Pinter: The Playwright, Martin Esslin describes the author's style thus:

"... in many of [Pinter's] plays the room in which we find the characters is the only safe place for them in the world ... and then someone comes in ... and suddenly it isn't."

Pinter shows this conflict through the sexual games that occur. According to Pinter, the male goal is sexual satisfaction. Therefore in the battle of the sexes, the woman always wins because she knows she can provide the prize. Ruth's authority over the household at the end of **The Homecoming** is the inevitable conclusion to this struggle. Although it may be shocking, it is perfectly logical to Pinter. The violent history he witnessed as a child made him realize that when "anything can happen, you are immunized against it when it does" (Esslin).

Communication is also a key issue in **The Homecoming**. The audience is thrown into the household without knowing anything about the characters or their motivations, and Pinter is slow to reveal them. He allows his characters to behave just the way we would moving directly into conversations without any lengthy explanations. As a result, the audience must use what the characters don't say to understand the story. For instance, both Ruth and Lenny are trying to hide who they really are. The pauses and silences occur because they are deciding what not to reveal:

LENNY: Just give me the glass.

RUTH: No.

*(Pause)*

LENNY: I'll take it then.

RUTH: If you take the glass . . . I'll take you.

*(Pause)*

LENNY: How about me taking the glass without you taking me?

RUTH: Why don't I just take you?

*(Pause)*

Through these conversations, Pinter shows how "...we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid" (Esslin). Pinter suggests that we deliberately avoid honest communication because we are afraid of what we might reveal.

**The Homecoming's** third theme is the essential brutality of man. Pinter once described his work as portraying "the weasel under the cocktail cabinet", and this play certainly confirms this point-of-view. The audience expects lower-class people like Max and Lenny to be cruel and obnoxious. On the other hand, Ruth's external appearance as a well-educated, upper-class wife and mother is revealed as just that: a front for the crude reality beneath. Ruth's actions (and those of her in-laws) seem to get more and more outrageous during the course of the play only because they are functioning outside the bounds of what society considers "good manners".

**The Homecoming** illustrates what might happen if we tossed out all of these conventions and "simply behaved". Pinter's focus on such themes as power, communication, and man's animal nature insure that his plays will be discussed (if not heatedly argued about) for a long time to come.

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Some think the "homecoming" referred to in the title is Ruth's, not Teddy's. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. The Homecoming's climax is a seemingly unbelievable proposition. When you look back over Pinter's silences -- what the characters are not mentioning -- do they make the outcome logical? Inevitable?
3. The following are some characteristics of what is known as "black comedy":
  - a. Funny dialogue
  - b. A grotesque situation
  - c. The reversal of acceptable morality or behaviorDo you think The Homecoming is a black comedy? Why or why not?
4. The characters toss out what society views as acceptable behavior and reveal their true selves. Do you think this is a more honest way for us to deal with each other? Would the result be paradise or anarchy?