The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual

The Fertility Goddess
And the Riddle of the Sphinx

“As to your mother’s marriage bed,—don’t fear it. Before this, in dreams too, as well as oracles, Many a man has lain with his own mother.”—Jocasta in Sophocles’ Oedipus the King.

When Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx, his confident solution was “man.” The half-woman, half-beast left him with a larger riddle, however, the riddle of himself as man. Jocasta gave him a clue to its solution when she told him that it was not an uncommon dream of man to lie with his own mother. This dream haunts Pinter’s dramatic world. As Pinter explores the riddling nature of man in his drama, at the heart of the riddle is man’s ambivalent relationship with woman.

The only women in The Caretaker are the ones mentioned by Aston and Davies. Aston is puzzled by the advances made to him by a woman he merely chatted with in a café, a common occurrence, Davies assures him, in his own experience. Davies also speaks with disgust of his
wife, whom he left when he found her unwashed underclothing in a vegetable pan. In *A Slight Ache*, Edward calls his model, middle-class wife a "lying slut," an appellation perhaps justified later when Flora embraces the stranger at their door as her new mate. In *The Collection*, Stella informs her husband of a passing affair and tantalizes him as the play proceeds with the question of its existence in reality or in her fantasy. And in *The Homecoming*, Ruth sends her respectable professor husband back to their three children in America while she remains with his all-male family in England in the combined role of mother, wife, and whore.

In Pinter's dramatic world, women continually play the double role of Sarah in *The Lover*, the role of wife and mistress as she envisions it or the role of wife and whore as her husband Richard comes to see it. The male reaction to women bristles with ambivalence and Oedipal tension as men struggle to keep their love for their wives and their lust for their whores separate (*Tea Party*) or to bring them together (*The Lover*). Martin Esslin sees this Oedipal tension developing through Pinter's three major plays with Stanley deprived of his mother (Meg) by his father (Goldberg and McCann) in *The Birthday Party*, the two brothers evicting their father in *The Caretaker*, and the sons realizing their dream of possessing the mother in *The Homecoming.*

Such psychological speculation about the male-female relationships in Pinter's drama is most fruitful, however, if seen in perspective with the complex texture of the plays and their ritual base. Pinter's plays are most definitely not case histories. No matter how bizarre or shocking Sarah's behavior in *The Lover* or Ruth's behavior in *The Homecoming* seems on the surface, it makes a good deal of sense vis-à-vis the poetic and ritual nature of the works. As Pinter himself remarked with impatience, after reading Dr. Franzblau's reduction of *The Homecoming* to a question of homosexuality, "It's about love and lack of love. The
people are harsh and cruel to be sure. Still they aren’t acting arbitrarily but for very deep-seated reasons.” To reduce such a complex investigation of love and family relationships to a homosexual explanation is as limited as to read *Hamlet* only as a tale of an Oedipus complex, or to reduce Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* to its component of psychological aberration.

Still, Freud’s attempt to investigate the psychology of Frazer’s findings in his book *Totem and Taboo* is relevant to an understanding of Pinter’s work. Although the book is an investigation of similar behavior between the neurotic and the savage, it does not focus on ritual as aberration so much as it attempts to gain a deeper understanding of the patterns of behavior that move all men. Pinter’s drama too, despite his brilliant depiction of individuals, becomes at its best an exploration of patterns that we all inherit and share.

Freud, who found the basis of all neurosis in the Oedipus complex, concludes in *Totem and Taboo* that “the beginnings of religion, ethics, society, and art meet in the Oedipus complex.” In the light of his conclusions, it is not surprising to find Oedipal conflict at the center of Pinter’s ritual dramas. The ambivalent attitude of the savage to his king is likened by Freud to the ambivalent attitude of the child to his father. The fertility rituals that Frazer explores and Pinter employs are examined as part of the competition of father and son for the mother. Witness his discussion of the death and rebirth of the vegetation god, whom he envisions as the son laboring over mother earth, youthful figures like Attis, Adonis, and others “who enjoyed the favours of maternal deities and committed incest with the mother in defiance of the father.” In mythology, Freud expounds, these deities are visited with short life or castration as punishment for their deeds; and their punishment is often visited upon them by their wrathful fathers, who appear in animal form.

The rituals investigated by Frazer are open to varied
psychological interpretation and take on different mean­nings in later anthropological studies. Gilbert Murray in “Hamlet and Orestes” discusses “the world-wide ritual story of what we may call the Golden Bough kings” as it “forms the basis of Greek tragedy” and is incorporated into Shakespeare’s Hamlet. As well as giving two basic alternatives for the seasonal ritual—one in which the summer vegetation spirit is slain by Winter and rises in the spring, the other in which the year-king slays the old king, weds the queen, grows proud, and is slain by the avenger of the former king—Murray presents various alternatives for the role of the female in the ritual. The queen might marry her husband’s slayer (Gertrude, Jocasta) or be slain with him (Clytemnestra). She might help the usurping son, or even marry him (Jocasta), though Jocasta as well as Gertrude and Clytemnestra die with their usurping second husbands.

Murray notes that in literature the queen mother or earth mother is often treated with sympathy, whatever incestuous, adulterous, or murderous paths she follows. Moral disapproval may be suspended, he suggests, when the vegetation ritual is seen to be at the basis of some of the incestuous or murderous acts, though such myths harbor the seeds of moral conflict.

But later on, when life has become more self-conscious and sensitive, if once a poet or dramatist gets to thinking of the story, and tries to realize the position and feelings of this eternally traitorous wife, this eternally fostering and protecting mother, he cannot but feel in her that element of inward conflict which is the seed of great drama. She is torn between husband, lover, and son.

Pinter’s own treatment of “the eternally traitorous wife” is often deeply sympathetic, although the focus in his plays varies, sometimes lighting on the suffering husband (Edward in A Slight Ache, Disson in Tea Party), sometimes
on the suffering son (Stanley in *The Birthday Party*), and sometimes on the suffering woman (Rose in *The Room*, Stella in *The Collection*, Ruth in *The Homecoming*). His treatment of the sexual relationship is usually ritualized, however; thus, despite the individuality of some of his characters, described by him as living at the edge of their existence, the relationship becomes in a sense more profoundly social than psychological in its significance, more concerned at times with territory than with sex. Freud's belief that sexual behavior takes primary motivation with the individual but does not possess the unifying factor of the "demands of self preservation" is clarifying here.

In one way the neuroses show a striking and far reaching correspondence with the great social productions of art, religion and philosophy, while again they seem like distortions of them. We may say that hysteria is a caricature of an artistic creation, a compulsion neurosis a caricature of a religion, and a paranoiac delusion a caricature of a philosophic system. In the last analysis this deviation goes back to the fact that the neuroses are asocial formations; they seek to accomplish by private means what arose in society through collective labour. In analysing the impulse of the neuroses one learns that motive powers of sexual origin exercise the determining influence in them, while the corresponding cultural creations rest upon social impulses and on such as have issued from the combination of egotistical and sexual components.

The ritual patterning of Pinter's drama, then, partly turns what may look like very neurotic behavior into behavior with a wider social significance and application. It also may account for the occasional predominance of the territorial imperative over the sexual as its focus; *The Caretaker* and *The Dwarfs*, for example, are plays in which women do not figure directly as characters.

The peculiar power of Pinter's treatment of women, however, lies in the ritual counterpoint in the plays rather than in their realistic or ritualistic elements alone. Rose's
dilemma in *The Room* is perfectly real and concrete, but we do not learn of her past as we learn of the past of a Blanche DuBois, with her tragic relationship with a homosexual husband, her dying relatives, and her dying land. Emphasis moves away from psychological explanation to ritual exploration as Rose's tea and breakfast ceremonies act in counterpart to her sacrifice in the eternal battle between father and son or father and husband for the woman.

But if Pinter's dramas succeed most when their ritual counterpart is at its fullest, his least successful portrayal of the sexual relationship is in his most conventional drama, *A Night Out*. In this three-act play, originally produced on radio (March 1, 1960) and then on television (April 24, 1960), psychological explanation replaces his more usual use of ritual exploration. The play is an overstatement of Pinter's recurrent identification of woman as mother and whore.

*A Night Out* revolves around the relationship between Albert Stokes and his mother. Albert, the stereotype rather than the archetype of the mama's boy, comes to a crucial juncture in his life when he attends an office party on a night he would ordinarily spend at home with his mother playing rummy. Unable to spare her son for a single "night out," Mrs. Stokes concentrates on trying to get him to "put the bulb in Grandma's room" though, as Albert reminds her, Grandma has been dead for ten years. Such nice detail does not save the play from a caricature of a possessive mother, as such over-clear exchanges as the following reveal:

**Mother:** Your father would turn in his grave if he heard you raise your voice to me. You're all I've got, Albert. I want you to remember that. I haven't got anyone else. I want you I want you to bear that in mind.

**Albert:** I'm sorry I raised my voice. (P. 6)

When Albert is accused at the party of taking liberties with a lady (the offender is really the elderly, senile Ryan,
in whose honor the party is given), he gets into a fight with an accuser who actually calls him a “mother’s boy.” Unable to really rebel against his mother, Albert returns home; and the audience is allowed to wonder if he actually hits her with the clock he lifts for the purpose.

In the following scene, Albert is picked up by a girl who poses as a dignified mother and picks at him much as his own mother does. But Albert sees through her pretense; the picture of her little girl is really herself, and she is no mother at all, only a prostitute. Yet Albert’s ineffectual bullying of the girl only echoes his ineffectual treatment of his mother, who is alive and sadistically forgiving at the play’s end.

What Albert has come to see, however, is a true likeness between his mother and the whore. “You’re all the same, you see, you’re all the same, you’re just a dead weight round my neck,” he blurts out at the girl, identifying her nagging with his mother’s. “You haven’t got any breeding. She hadn’t either. And what about those girls tonight? Same kind. And that one. I didn’t touch her!” (p. 43).

Albert is as unable to touch a girl as he is to resist his mother. Horrified but held by his own mother’s seductive possessiveness, he is caught in the toils of a love-hate relationship that is almost a documented case history—rare for Pinter’s drama—of an Oedipus complex.

Pinter’s recurrent identification of mother and whore appears also in The Birthday Party, in which Stanley’s relationship with Meg is very similar to Albert’s relationship with his mother. Stanley, though he flinches beneath Meg’s blatantly sensuous possessiveness, is unable to break away. In that play, however, the relationship becomes part of the ritual sacrifice of Stanley as scapegoat, and Meg’s behavior is part of her role as a tragi-comic fertility goddess. Albert and Mrs. Stokes of A Night Out are too conventional to move in such mythical dimension; they remain one-dimensional. Mrs. Stokes is seen as totally destructive, almost, indeed, as caricatured as an Albee “Mommy.”
The Basement tends to go to the other extreme. If the Albert-mother relationship in A Night Out remains naturalistic and stereotyped in conception, The Basement is almost pure ritual, with little attempt at realistic character development. The men who battle for apartment and girl seem in this play "subject to the revolving of some eternal triangle, more like automata than people."16

Here too the woman in the play is seen as a whore, switching with abandon from Stott to Law, even turning to smile at Law from the bed she shares with Stott. Law considers her a whore and betrays to his rival her seductive actions to him, but curiously, it is the defeated Law who gets the girl in this drama.

In Frazer's theory, the successors to the priesthood of Nemi were all allied with the goddess of the grove whom they served.17 The girl's alliance with the victim rather than the victor in The Basement is a variation on the Golden Bough ritual, for mother earth is scorned, banished with the victim, even as Clytemnestra was killed with her usurping Aegisthus. There are indications, however, that the victim is also victor in the play, or at least that he has been a usurper. Stott, moving in on Law, seems to be the usurper, but the play gives evidence of a continuous cycle in which Stott and Law alternately possess the basement apartment, the evicted man taking the girl.

Because the ritual is so nakedly and visually emphasized in The Basement, the play, though an arresting piece, lacks the complexity of the masterly one-act drama A Slight Ache. In the earlier drama Flora's role as fertility goddess is developed with elegant ritual counterpoint—the English matron juxtaposed with the archetypal goddess of earth—as Pinter makes his comment on modern British life and the primitive ongoing rhythms of life as well (see chapter 3).

In Tea Party (1965), a television drama based on an earlier short story and reminiscent of A Slight Ache, women
are seen once more at the center of the ritual transfer of power. When asked what the play was about, Pinter said it was the "story of a business man's reaction to his new secretary and the effect she has on him."\textsuperscript{18} Disson is head of a prosperous business selling sanitary ware—"more bidets than anyone else in England."\textsuperscript{19} He hires a new secretary the day before his second marriage, and his relationship with her runs parallel to his relationship with his wife and family. Behind the amusing pack of clichés that he calls his life lurks a self-doubting, lustful man who "touches" his provocative and sensual secretary as she playfully protests her previous employer has done. The play reveals Disson becoming obsessed with his hidden, dying self, which his secretary is bringing to the fore.

The clichés with which Disson has built his life involve efficiency, communication, and interdependence, with efficiency firmly cutting him off from the communication and interdependence that he calls indispensable. "I think I should explain to you the sort of man I am," he tells his newly hired brother-in-law, Willy.

I'm a thorough man. I like things to be done and done well. I don't like dithering. I don't like indulgence. I don't like self-doubt. I don't like fuzziness. I like clarity. Clear intention. Precise execution. That's why your sister loves me. I don't play about at the periphery of matters. I go right to the center. (Pp. 52-53)

Disson's development of a visual problem has less tragic overtones than Edward's "slight ache" in his eyes because Disson has become almost a living parody of the efficient business world; his domineering, hollow phrases preclude any real contact or understanding with Willy, his wife, or his children by a previous marriage. The children, John and Tom, inhabit their father's cliché-ridden world and comment only briefly on its hollowness when their new stepmother, Diana, tells them how much they mean to their father.
JOHN: Children seem to mean a great deal to their parents, I’ve noticed. Though I’ve often wondered what “a great deal” means.

TOM: I’ve often wondered what “mean” means. (P. 55)

Ronald Hayman finds Disson, the blind and bandaged victim at his own tea party, less convincing than the blindfolded Stanley at his birthday party because Disson would never “choose himself as a victim or see himself as a failure,” whereas Stanley does. At least, Hayman concludes, the play does not concern itself with “exploring or explaining” such a self-conception. Fortunately, the play does not explain Disson as victim, but it certainly does explore him as such. Aside from the hollowness of his clichés and his overprotestation of strength, Disson encourages the very forces that threaten him, promoting the brother-in-law who has toasted him at the wedding by praising Diana, who has taken Diana as his secretary with all the overtones of “touching” that such an arrangement suggests in the play, and who would take Disson’s own secretary, Wendy, as well. The short story on which the play is based was told from Disson’s point of view, and the play too is written very much from his angle: the audience feels the impact of the forces bearing down on Disson as if they were sharing his nightmare.

In Tea Party, women are divided, at first as wife—the dignified Diana who loves Disson for his strength and certitude—and whore—the seductive secretary who plays the role of earth mother to Disson and likes him for his weakness and childishness. “I always feel like kissing you when you’ve got that on round your eyes,” Wendy assures Disson, who has her chiffon round his eyes. “Do you know that? Because you’re all in the dark” (p. 79). As the play progresses, however, and Willy seems to have won all for himself, reigning as new king at the anniversary tea party, both Diana and Wendy, now allied, are envisioned as Willy’s to do with what he will, as whores.
Hinchcliffe finds the epigraph for the original short-story version of *Tea Party* ("In the country of the blind he found himself a king") inappropriate, but in ritual terms the epigraph is exact and illuminating for the play as well. Here again are all the signs of the dying king-god, the seasonal year demon. The play covers exactly one year, beginning with Disson's marriage and ending with his first anniversary and his fall. The wife, who appears at first in all her dignity, gradually assumes the aspect of whore, merging her role with that of the sensual secretary because inevitably the wife is allied with the new king. Diana, the goddess of the grove of Nemi, also might have assumed the aspect of whore to the reigning king, who knew of her inevitable treachery to him. That the new alliance in *Tea Party* has incestuous overtones is understandable too. "Tell me about the place where you two were born. Where you played at being brother and sister" (p. 73), the suspicious Disson asks Willy. Here are overtones of the Oedipal conflict that informs the seasonal rituals, though in *Tea Party*, the opposing son is seen as a brother.

But why is Disson a king in the "country of the blind"? Echoes of H. G. Wells's story "The Country of the Blind" provide ironical associations, for Disson's aspirations are crushed even as the sighted hero of the Wells tale finds himself helpless amidst the blind. But it is Disson who loses his sight in *Tea Party*, not the others. In the short-story version, however, all the characters wore spectacles, suggesting a generally myopic society over which Disson has reigned. Enough of the tragic rhythm, discussed in relationship to *A Slight Ache* in chapter 3, remains in the play to suggest that Disson's failing sight masks his growing insight into the true nature of his surroundings and himself. Like Sophocles' Oedipus, Disson is most kingly when he is dispossessed, most aware when he is totally blind.

Disson's awareness, unlike Oedipus' or even Edward's in *A Slight Ache*, is almost inarticulate in the play, placing
him nearer to the early victim, Stanley. Stanley, however, tried to evade the society that would make him conform, whereas Disson has consented to reign over that society as arch-conformist and is hence seen as much a victim of himself as of others. His spiritual death becomes even more ludicrous than Stanley's; the orgy that accompanies it is set not at a birthday party but at a tea party in his super-sanitary office with its atmosphere of lifeless sterility. The satirical thrust of the play is evident as the modern business magnate and the society over which he rules are almost caricatured. The play, then, seems to lie somewhere between A Slight Ache and The Birthday Party; its ritual counterpoint suggests the cyclical persistence of a society that is at once parodied and infused with new life, a society of the blind with its king who finally cannot bear to see and its queen who is inevitably wife and whore.

Woman is again portrayed as wife and whore in two other television plays by Pinter, The Collection (1961) and The Lover (1963). These plays share with the drama of Pirandello a sense of the elusiveness of reality. The series of views on the nature of an alleged affair between Stella and Bill in The Collection is never resolved into a "right" view, and one is left with something of the effect of Pirandello's Right You Are If You Think You Are. The tightrope Richard and Sarah walk in The Lover as they straddle the world of fantasy and reality—husband and wife by night and lovers by day—is not unlike the tightrope walked by Pirandello's Henry IV, who cannot escape from the reality of his fantasy. Pinter shares with Pirandello, and with much of modern drama since that prophetic writer, a sense of the elusiveness and fragmentary nature of identity.

In The Collection, Stella's husband of two years attempts a confrontation with Bill, with whom Stella has confessed a passing affair indulged in at a recent dress showing at Leeds. Bill first denies the affair, then gives a different version of it with Stella as seducer, and finally suggests they
merely talked about what they would do. Stella, at the play's end, strokes her kitten and will not tell.

The truth, however, lies not in the reality or fantasy of the affair so much as it lies in the relationships that are revealed in James's quest for the truth. Stella's alleged lover Bill is engaged in a homosexual relationship with Harry, an elegant gentleman who has picked him up in a slum. Harry is intensely jealous of James, with whom Bill plays in a seductive and hostile fashion. James, apparently tempted by Bill, vengefully thanks his wife for opening up a new world to him as if she has given him nothing else in their relationship, and the three men play out their mutual jealousies in games, mock duels with fruit knives that draw blood but leave them curiously unsatisfied. The point is that all the characters are deeply shaken about themselves, that they clearly cannot know themselves or Stella absolutely.23

Walter Kerr, who admires Pinter for his Pirandellian conception of character as potential rather than as something fixed, suggests that the playwright's recurrent use of the "whore" image in his plays is his way of seeing the fluidity of identity. The whore "by definition, lacks definition,"24 he suggests. "Existentially speaking; we are all life's whores to the degree that we are in motion and have not arbitrarily codified and thereby stilled ourselves."25

Pinter may indeed concentrate on the whore because she is "unknown," but he goes beyond this Pirandellian sense of man's eternally becoming, fragmented identity as the whore plays her ritual role—a role that, within limits, is defined. The two disturbed relationships in The Collection reveal the three men in their incomplete sexuality stalking one another in a super-sophisticated jungle with Stella, the fertility goddess, who for the first time is seen to be suffering in her role. Must she become a whore and serve the incumbent to the throne—the slum child rising in the world through Harry's attentions? Is she to be the un-
known enigma to the Golden Bough priests who battle with one another for ascendancy and possibly for her, but more for themselves? Pinter said that, after seeing the play for some time, his sympathies were with Stella, alone with her cat. Flora, the self-satisfied, humorous fertility goddess of *A Slight Ache*, is replaced in this play by a suffering goddess whose riddle and enigma is the tragedy she endures in the midst of the male comedy that surrounds her.

Once more, Pinter employs the primitive ritual role of fertility goddess, wife and whore, in ritual counterpoint—a brilliant comment on modern life in its understated sophistication and on ancient archetypal relationships of man and woman at the same time.

What is astute in Pinter's handling of his subject is that nearly all the impulses involved are only partially expressed and thus emerge only as possibilities. There can be no Othello or Iago in such a situation because modern men (and women) disapprove of jealousy and the acts of violence arising from it. They therefore attempt to repress them so that finally they (and we) begin to doubt the reality of their feelings. Am I really “fit to be tied” because my wife has been unfaithful? Can my contact with that man be really considered “an affair,” or did I just toy with the idea of such a contact? If I were certain that he or she had an affair would I divorce, maim or murder, or would I go on living with my mate in tortured or “sophisticated” indecision, the possible infidelity forgotten or forgiven because I am unsure whether I also transgressed?

Amid talk of olives and church bells, then, Bill almost dares but doesn’t. And Stella remains enigmatic, smiling, an isolated modern woman with her cat, an ancient riddling sphinx playing her tragi-comic role.

If the woman in *The Collection* is treated with sympathy in her double role as whore-wife, the role of the woman as wife-whore becomes the very subject of *The Lover*. This television play explores the tensions that arise when Richard challenges his relationship with his wife Sarah, who
for years has been his wife by night and his lover by day. As in *The Collection*, the fragmented nature of life is explored as Richard comes to view his wife-mistress as a whore and he himself plays various roles within roles, his role as lover divided between that of attacker and protector. But as the play concentrates on Richard's desire to integrate the roles played by himself and his wife, Sarah's need to continue their compartmentalized existence is fully examined. Her need, in fact, proves stronger and dominates as the play ends.

We are given no psychological explanations for the couple's role-playing and sexual games in the play; their odd behavior is in no respect treated as a study in neurosis. Rather, Pinter makes his modern British suburban couple enact their ritual of love in counterpoint with the ritual of their married life together, the alternation of roles suggesting at once the fragmented nature of modern life and the archetypal, eternally divided role of the female.

The play gains its humor from an understated acceptance of Sarah's lover by her briefcase-wielding, cheek-kissing husband departing for work. We do not yet know that husband and lover are one.

**RICHARD:** (Amiably.) Is your lover coming today?

**SARAH:** Mmmn.

**RICHARD:** What time?

**SARAH:** Three.

**RICHARD:** Will you be going out or staying in?

**SARAH:** Oh I think we'll stay in.

**RICHARD:** I thought you wanted to go to that exhibition.

**SARAH:** I did, yes but I think I'd prefer to stay in with him today.

**RICHARD:** Mmmn-hmmm. Well, I must be off.

(He goes to hall and puts on his bowler hat.)

Will he be staying long, do you think?

**SARAH:** Mmmmmn

**RICHARD:** About six, then.
SARAH: Yes.
RICHARD: Have a pleasant afternoon.
SARAH: Mmmn.
RICHARD: Bye-bye.²⁸

If the lover did not turn out to be the husband, the understated acceptance of him by Richard might lead into a parody on the passionless, understated life of the English living a life of convenience and ritual comfort. The introduction of Richard as lover and then as husband jealous of himself as lover, however, suggests passionate undercurrents. As the couple enact their passion with the primitive beating of fingers on bongo drums and an appropriate change of clothing and roles, their passion reveals a more instinctive and primitive side to their lives, which threatens to break out of the compartment of life in which they have kept it. The ritual counterpoint of lovemaking with homemaking suggests the problematical nature of modern homemaking, which can become a comfortable and sterile decoration. Richard speaks of his pride in his wife and her “command of contemporary phraseology” and her “delicate use of the very latest idiomatic expression, so subtly employed” (p. 31) as if she were a handy possession. But the counterpoint suggests as well the age-old role of woman as fertility goddess, wife to the old god and the new—and hence, whore.

Perhaps Sarah’s desire to keep her roles of wife and mistress separate (she does not accept the role of whore) is her way of trying to defeat time, the eternal cycle of life enacted in other Pinter dramas. By playing both roles with her own husband, Sarah removes the need for a new god or king. Richard is both, and hence she will remain forever faithful to her husband, even as she will remain forever alluring to her lover, if only they may remain the same person. And they may only remain the same, she apparently feels, if the roles are kept separate. Hence, Pinter
comments wryly in his play on the relationship of the sexes, on modern attitudes toward women, and on the ambiguous nature of her role at all times.

The ambiguous nature of women is the subject as well of Pinter’s 1963 film version of Penelope Mortimer’s novel *The Pumpkin Eater*. Once again Pinter deals with a fertility goddess, but here she is more the earth mother, mother-wife, than wife-whore.

The conflict between husband and children is overwhelming to Jo (played by Anne Bancroft), who is working on her third marriage and eighth child. Pinter removes much of the psychological explanation of the novel as well as its introspection, moving, as it were, outside the novel and looking in. When Philip Oakes commends the film’s director Jack Clayton for avoiding a casebook style and for capturing “something of all marriages” in the scrutiny of this particular one, he doubtless has Pinter’s script partly to thank.

Pinter’s exploration of the eternal mother, with its curious echoes of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, is set in a modern sophisticated world with which his character can hardly cope. Her nervous breakdown takes place at Harrod’s, for example, and she is threatened by a hysterical woman while imprisoned under the drier at a beauty parlor. Once again the veneer of the secular rituals of parties, shopping tours, and so on, works in counterpoint with primitive undercurrents, which erupt finally into a savage physical fight between husband and wife. “Some of the behavior of Peter Finch and Anne Bancroft is so primitively savage—and I don’t mean only the clawing, slapping, tearing, pinching fight they have together—that we feel they might be wearing animal skins.” Jo, however, takes her place with Pinter’s other sympathetic portrayals of women divided between the multiple roles which sometimes do reduce them to primitive behavior.
Perhaps the most complex and moving of Pinter's tragi-comic heroines, though, is Ruth, who combines the roles of wife, mother, and whore in Pinter's three-act drama, *The Homecoming* (1965). Here Pinter's focus is clearly on the fertility goddess and her place in the ritual renewal of life.

On a realistic plane, Ruth's behavior in the play is both shocking and bizarre. Spurning her professor husband and her respected and comfortable life with him and their three children in America, Ruth turns to her husband's family with whom they are visiting in England and decides to stay with them. She dances with her husband's brother Lenny and kisses him, rolls on the couch with his brother Joey, and contracts to stay on with her father-in-law Max and family as general housekeeper, prostitute, and mother—all before her husband's eyes and finally with his consent. Realistically speaking, such macabre behavior is only comprehensible if Ruth is regarded as a nymphomaniac whom her husband willingly unloads.

Pinter, however, has not conceived Ruth as a neurotic, realistic character, although she is deeply troubled. Even on a realistic plane, her actions make a certain amount of sense, and on a poetic and ritual plane, they become clear and fascinating in their significance.

Teddy, Ruth's husband, is the intellectual in the play who is contrasted with the crude family with whom he has broken. Max, his father, is an ex-butcher, whose shaky rule of the family is challenged by Ruth. Lenny, his elder brother, is a pimp, and Joey, his younger brother, is a demolition worker in training to be a boxer. The family picture is completed by Max's brother Sam, a chauffeur, whose generally passive role in the drama is not unlike Teddy's. The dead mother Jessie is constantly evoked by the entire family, who live in an atmosphere of open hostility that is extended to Ruth. Max greets Ruth as a slut who will replace his wife.
Max: I haven’t seen the bitch for six years, he comes home without a word, he brings a filthy scrubber off the street, he shacks up in my house!

Teddy: She’s my wife! We’re married!

Pause.

Max: I’ve never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died. They come back from America, they bring the slopbucket with them. They bring the bedpan with them. (To Teddy.) Take that disease away from me. Get her away from me.32

Ruth, however, is less perturbed with Max’s welcome than with her husband’s attitude toward her and life. Perhaps she understands her father-in-law’s crude bluster as the true welcome it soon becomes. Jessie, whom he hated, loved, and needed, is alternately idealized as an angel and berated as a bitch and whore by Max; and Ruth is more than willing to play the double role in which he correctly casts her. Teddy, on the other hand, is a dead man; and Ruth has experienced a near death in her relationship with him. Teddy operates, he explains, “on things and not in things” (p. 61). His critical works, beyond the comprehension of his family, are based on this power of his to remain uninvolved. “You’re just objects,” he tells his family. “You just move about. I can observe it. I can see what you do. It’s the same as I do. But you’re lost in it. You won’t get me being I won’t be lost in it” (p. 62).

Life with Teddy, then, has held no reality for Ruth, who rejects Teddy’s noninvolvement for the movement of life. When Lenny tries to engage Teddy in philosophical discussion about the nature of being, Teddy hedges about what is in his province; but Ruth enters the discussion even as she chooses to enter the family.

Don’t be too sure though. You’ve forgotten something. Look at me, I move my leg. That’s all it is. But I wear underwear... which moves with me it captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is
simple. It's a leg moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict your observation to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant than the words which come through them. You must bear that possibility in mind. (Pp. 52-53)

Ruth follows this declaration for sheer instinctual being with a description of America as a wasteland, a desert. "It's all rock," she says. "And sand. It stretches so far everywhere you look. And there's lots of insects there" (p. 53). Ruth has come home to England thirsty as from a desert, and her embracing of the family shows the measure of her thirst for life that persists in her and has died in her husband. In a crucial scene with Lenny, who has given Ruth a glass of water that he then wishes to take away, Ruth refuses the glass and says, "If you take the glass I'll take you" (p. 34). Flustered by what he considers "some kind of proposal" (p. 34), Lenny loses the round as Ruth drains the glass. "Oh, I was thirsty" (p. 35), she explains, and the rest of the play continues to reveal the depths of that thirst as she proceeds to take Lenny and his family on. Perhaps the action of the play may be described as Ruth's escape from the desert (America and Teddy) to the jungle (London and Teddy's family). At any rate, it is clearly Ruth who comes home and Teddy who must leave.

In many ways, then, The Homecoming moves in a parallel vein with A Slight Ache. Like Edward in the one-act play, Teddy is the cliché-ridden philosopher who has become old and impotent before his time. "Winter'll soon be upon us. Time to renew one's wardrobe," Lenny remarks; and Ruth agrees that "that's a good thing to do" (p. 56). The fertility goddess must look to the new god and new year, forsaking the old as the seasons change; and Teddy is brushed off by the family as a fallen leaf.

If the new god appears in the guise of Max and family, an impotent crew basically hostile to women, he is no less disturbing than the old broken-down matchseller who comes
to replace Edward. Once again, Pinter's view of the ritual renewal is a dark one; the choices are not between good and evil but between life and death. Ruth will be a mother to Joey, who is satisfied to "not go the whole hog" (p. 68) if he can have her love. (Roger Pierce suggests Joey is more virginal than impotent in the play, which, if true, makes him the best candidate for the new god.) She will be a whore for Lenny and take care of the house and the sexual needs of the family as well. She will be a wife to Max, displacing him, however, as she takes over as matriarch of the family. The deal completed, Sam, who recognizes the reincarnation of Jessie in Ruth's combined role as whore-wife-mother, blurs out his long-harbored secret that "MacGregor had Jessie in the back of my cab as I drove them along" (p. 78), and collapses. He is unable to accept the image of woman so corrupted or of himself even passively involved in that corruption. Once again, the play is hardly an unqualified celebration.

Ruth's choice is indeed a complex one, and Pinter views it in the ritual counterpoint of the play with a combination of bitter satire and celebration. Ruth is better equipped to deal with the jungle than the desert and operates with her new family not only with all the barbarity of primitive passion but with the barbarity of civilization as well. Civilization is seen at its most cynical when Ruth closes the deal on her new relationships with the "contract ritual" of modern life, which moves in bitterly hilarious counterpoint with the primitive ritual movement that the contract designates.

**RUTH:** I'd need an awful lot. Otherwise I wouldn't be content.

**LENNY:** You'd have everything.

**RUTH:** I would naturally want to draw up an inventory of everything I would need, which would require your signatures in the presence of witnesses.

**LENNY:** Naturally.
RUTH: All aspects of the agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified to our mutual satisfaction before we finalized the contract.

LENNY: Of course. (Pp. 77-78)

The nature of the homecomer is further illustrated when we see Ruth at the end of the play: the enigmatic sphinx who Max fears has not gotten it clear. "She'll use us, she'll make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it! You want to bet?" (p. 81), Max says, the play ending with his plea on bended knee for a kiss. Like Flora, Ruth has not only discarded one husband for a new one but reigns at the play's end as fertility goddess, in full control of the situation. The priest of Nemi, one recalls, is but a guard in the sacred grove of Diana.

*The Homecoming* differs from *A Slight Ache*, however, in its ritual implications, as the focus moves from the discarded husband to the wife. Our sympathies are enlisted for the dying Edward in *A Slight Ache*; but Teddy is already dead when *The Homecoming* begins, and our attention and sympathies are focused instead on Ruth. Ruth, like Flora, would avoid the whole situation if possible, suggesting to Teddy that they leave even before they are greeted, just as Flora would ignore the intrusive matchseller. Doubtless the two women sense the nature of the ritual to be undergone and the agonizing sacrifice at its center. But if the men initiate the ritual in each situation, Ruth no less than Flora ends by embracing the role that she must play; and the drama focuses continually on her often unstated feelings as she officiates at and endures the play's ritual renewal.

If Edward was both victim and victor in *A Slight Ache*, this double role of victim and victor is assumed by Ruth rather than Teddy in *The Homecoming*. True, Teddy has victimized Ruth by offering her only a sterile, unreal life in America (Michael Craig, who created the role, said, "He's an awful man, Teddy. He's rationalized his aggres-
sions, but underneath he's Eichmann.”), and he is discarded in turn by Ruth. The play, however, focuses less on Teddy as scapegoat, who seems content with taking Lenny's cheese roll in exchange for his wife, than on Ruth, who in a much fuller capacity enacts the victim-victor role.

As victim Ruth has clearly suffered as the partner of a dead man who praises her in the empty conventionalized phrases that are a measure of his ignorance of her individuality.

She's a great help to me over there. She's a wonderful wife and mother. She's a very popular woman. She's got lots of friends. It's a great life, at the University you know. It's a very good life. We've got a lovely house—we've got all we've got everything we want. It's a very stimulating environment. (P. 50)

Ruth, though, has not had what she wants in what to her is a deadening environment. Her prior life as a model “for the body,” suggestive of prostitution, involved modeling at times outdoors near a lake; and despite the element of victimization in such a life, the lake on which she dwells wistfully, like the glass of water she drains in the contest with Lenny, has obviously sustained her in the past. Her acceptance of her role as a whore-mother-wife in the new family, then, is both degrading and sustaining to Ruth. She will suffer the insults of her new family—“she's a tart” (p. 58), Joey tells his father in front of her—accepting the role of the beloved and detested Jessie because it fulfills her hunger and thirst for sex and her desire to be needed. And the men need her in a far deeper sense than Teddy does, for they are still alive and struggling.

As Ruth becomes the central sacrificial victim of the play, she becomes the central figure of divinity as well. Rising from the couch on which she has submitted as victim to Joey's advances, Ruth becomes the imperious victor, demanding food and drink and finally making her contract
with the family very much on her own terms. Ruth has re-
placed Jessie, just as the matchseller replaced Edward, and
Lenny and Joey have replaced Teddy and Max. Rose, the
victim of *The Room*, was called home and could not come.
Ruth comes home as victim and stays as victim-victor.

The play's richness derives partly from the double ritual
movement in which Teddy and Ruth are both sacrificed
and Ruth and possibly Lenny and Joey are reborn. Lenny
is the play's true philosopher, always questioning everyone
in the self-mocking manner of Mick in *The Caretaker* and
covering his own sensitivity by his crude banter, but never-
theless revealing his suffering spirit of inquiry. Lenny
greets his returning brother with his sleeplessness: "It’s
just that something keeps waking me up. Some kind of
tick" (p. 25). In his first interchange with Ruth, Lenny
refuses to agree with his brother’s identification of the tick-
ing sound as the clock.

The trouble is I’m not all that convinced it was the clock. I
mean there are lots of things which tick in the night, don’t
you find that? All sorts of objects, which, in the day, you
wouldn’t call anything else but commonplace. They give you
no trouble. But in the night any given one of a number of
them is liable to start letting out a bit of a tick. (P. 28)

Lenny might be describing the play’s action with his
awareness of life’s undercurrents, the impending doom
which lurks beneath the commonplace, that old weasel of
Pinter’s under the cocktail cabinet.

Lenny’s philosophical questioning of the reluctant
Teddy on the essence of life also has sincere undercurrents,
and his crude questioning of his father about the night of
his conception is particularly revealing.

I’ll tell you what, Dad, since you’re in the mood for a bit of a
chat, I’ll ask you a question. It’s a question I’ve been
meaning to ask you for some time. That night . . . you know
the night you got me that night with Mum, what
was it like? Eh? When I was just a glint in your eye. What was it like? What was the background to it? I mean, I want to know the real facts about my background. I mean, for instance, is it a fact that you had me in mind all the time, or is it a fact that I was the last thing you had in mind? (P. 36)

In *Myth and Reality*, Eliade discusses the need for man to dwell on his beginnings, which provide him with a model or source of renewal. If, as he suggests, "the return to origins gives the hope of rebirth," Lenny's curiosity about his own begetting as well as his general curiosity about life reveals his search for renewal in the wasteland he inhabits. Beneath the mask of the sadistic pimp is the frightened child seeking in the darkness of his life for what might hopefully be more ideal origins in some long-lost paradise. He seeks vainly too for a mother's love in the woman whom he recognizes with ambivalence as his slut-mother of old.

"*The Homecoming*,” writes Richard Schechner, “is a probe of the dark male attitudes toward the 'mother-whore' and the equally compelling female desire to play this double role.” Once again Pinter probes into such universal attitudes and desires with that ritual counterpoint which juxtaposes modern life with that which is ancient and universal. The play's secular rituals—Ruth serving tea, the men smoking cigars—move in counterpoint with the ritual sacrifice and renewal which transpires amidst this “taking of a toast and tea.”

Pinter, it would seem, cares deeply for all of the lost characters of his drama who he admits act "pretty horribly" but always, he says, "out of the texture of their lives and for other reasons which are not evil but slightly desperate.” His sympathetic portrayal of Stella and Sarah and his humorous portrayal of Flora have led him in this play, moreover, to dwell on his own version of that alien biblical Ruth who comes home in despair and makes her desperate choice for life. At their best Pinter's women do more than struggle for power; they struggle for life. And if
within that struggle they act as destroyer as well as preserver, as wife, mother, and whore, perhaps, after all, they fulfill Pinter's honest and unflinching vision of what life is.

Although the focus shifts back to the male in Pinter's 1967 film adaptation of Nicolas Mosley's novel, *The Accident*, Anna (played by Jacqueline Sassard) is strongly reminiscent of Ruth in *The Homecoming*. Like Ruth, the suffering Anna, a lovely and exotic Australian student at Oxford, supplies the needs of the various men in her life. She is potential mistress, whore, and earth mother to her tutor Stephen, sensitively interpreted by Dirk Bogard, who had worked with the Pinter-Losey combination in *The Servant*. She is potential wife to Stephen's aristocratic student, William, and becomes engaged to him. And she is mistress to Charlie, one of Stephen's more extroverted colleagues.

Stephen takes Anna after the accident which kills her fiancé—an accident which begins and ends the film, and is in a sense no accident at all but an inevitable part of the ritual that patterns the film. His wife Rosalind (played by Pinter's wife, Vivien Merchant), struggles alone to give birth to their third child even as Stephen strives to recapture his vanishing youth by living out his desires with Anna. It is as if Stephen must explore woman in all of her potential roles, as wife, mother, and whore, before he can give up Anna and return to his home, his wife, and himself.

If *The Accident* involves the battle of possession for a woman and for youth and for self, the film medium allows that battle to work itself out in subtle character development and a patterning of time sequence that more fully suppresses the nightmare that erupts into Pinter's dramas and maintains a strong naturalistic surface until the end. Beneath that surface the battle exacts its victims— all suffer in the film, and William dies; but in no other Pinter play or film is the resolution as richly suggestive of a renewal of life almost unqualified by the bitterness of battle. The
film suggests a fuller celebration of life, a greater acceptance of it, than any other work that Pinter has attempted thus far.

Stephen is a philosopher of another order than the dried-up Teddy of *The Homecoming* or the tortured and impotent Lenny. *The Accident*’s hero, rather, is an intelligent, inquiring, emotional man married to a sensitive and understanding wife; and out of the awareness of the couple new life emerges triumphantly. The ritual is there, bizarre in the details of the accident and the subsequent “taking” of Anna, savage as the game (a kind of football) played by the male guests at William’s aristocratic, ancestral home, and clear in the battle literally to the death between Stephen and William for possession; but Stephen is able to make something of the ritual—to find new meaning for his life and to truly rejoice in it.

Pinter’s hero in the film is a touch more alienated than Mosley’s hero in the novel, less able to talk with his wife, less sure of the life of their new child at the end. Some of the reasons for keeping Anna at his house and protecting her from the police are obscured in the film, which accentuates the final ritual movement over the naturalistic surface. Still, Pinter has worked with a book which has given him the more hopeful characters with whom he works and a very conscious ritual base (the book, as no Pinter play, refers specifically to its action in terms of fertility rites and earth mothers); hence, it is difficult to determine how much of the celebration is his, how much Mosley’s.

Pinter, however, has remained essentially faithful to his own themes and techniques in *The Accident*, as he has in his other films. And he may even have found through Mosley’s Stephen the key to an opening up of character on a more complex and tragic level than he had thus far achieved. It remains difficult, though, to evaluate the film as Pinter’s own because of its faithfulness to the novel. Perhaps, too, one misses in the film’s slightly romantic
treatment of its theme some of the power of the celebration in *The Homecoming*, which is so tautly held in check by the caustic satire of secular rituals that accompany its sacred ritual to its bitter and enigmatic end. And despite the haunting character of the Sphinx-like Anna, she is a character who will vanish from Stephen’s life like a dream. Ruth has come home to stay.