(1) A SLIGHT ACHE — A loss of real self:

Originally conceived as a radio play, A Slight Ache has also been performed on the stage. This play is based on a middle-class idiom: Edward and Flora are an affluent middle class couple: who live in a large country house surrounded by gardens. Edward used to be in business, now he regards himself as some thing of an intellectual; he mentions that he is engaged on writing a book on space and time; sometimes he refers to his plans for a work on the Belgium Congo.

The play starts with Edward and Flora at breakfast; their dialogue about trivial matters shows — as does the dialogue between Gus and Ben at the opening of The Dumb Waiter — that there is considerable tension between them. Do wasps 'bite' or 'sting'? The question leads to a bitter altercation. And the wasp which has strayed on to the breakfast table is trapped in a marmalade Jar by Edward and, after prolonged torture, killed by having boiling tea water poured over it.
Edward, who has complained about a slight ache in his eyes, rejoins in the thought that the hot water will blind the wasp:

...Tilt the pot. Tilt Aah... down here...
eight down... blinding him... that’s... it.

(P.174)

There is an image of blindness - as in *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* - which seems to be equated with sexual inadequacy and death. The bitterness, hatred and cruelty which lurk behind the polite voices and formal manners in this marriage, are instrumental in the manifestation of marital discordance. Edward and Flora are worried. For sometime, about two months an old man with a tray of matches has been standing at the back entrance to their garden, trying to sell matches to the passers by. But hardly any one ever passes there. Edward seems to be scared of the old man, to ascertain the truth, he invites the old man in. He asks Flora to go and get him. As he does not speak throughout the play, this old match seller seems to be an illusion of Edward. Edward’s attempts to draw the match seller into conversation turns, confronted with mute silence and speechlessness, drives Edward into a nervous monologue which,
increasingly becomes hysterical, snobbish, pretentious intellectualism and selfish. Edward asks Flora to lead him (the match seller) out into the garden he seems weakened; the slight ache from which he suffered initially has grown into a general loss of vitality, the start of descent into the decay of old age.

Now it is Flora's turn to make the man speak. The encounter with the old match-seller provokes Flora into sexual fantasies of her youth and first love. When Edward returns Flora keeps him away from the room saying that the old man is dying.

Edward retorts with a furious verbal attack on his wife:

You lying slut. Get back to your trough!

(P.178)

Flora goes out, Edward is again left alone with the match seller. Now it is a stream of consciousness and he talks of his youth, his athletic prowess, cricket; his surveying the sea from a hill through a telescope, following the path of three masted schooners. Edward falls on the floors complaining about the germ he caught in his eyes. The role is reversed
and it is Edward who seems to be partially blind asks the match-seller to lead him out into the garden:

Edward: Take my hand. (P. 180)

Flora has come in. The match-seller goes over to her. She hands Edward the match-seller’s tray, and leaves the rooms with the old man.

Now who could be the match-seller? What is his purpose of standing out? It does not mean to be a realistic character. Edward is anxious to see him standing there, it may be the cause of his slight ache. His personality is at stake, may be it is a loss of his personality, selflessness or identity. Perhaps it is an expulsion from Flora’s bed. Edward’s fate is closely analogous to Rose’s in The Room. She too is visited by a symbolic character who had been waiting for her outside. She too, is stricken with blindness and presumably loses her warm home to be expelled into the cold of the basement; death. Edward’s expulsion is similar to the situation of Stanley’s in The Birthday Party. It could be a metaphor for his dying. Flora finds sexual rejuvenation, or reawakening her carnal desires in match-seller’s appearance, may be
symbolic gesture of her liberation, from a hated, impotent husband. It is a return of sexual life for Flora, the motherly but sexually active and aroused woman, the man who is incapable of love; the coexistence of extreme realism and the symbolism of the dream.

The play seems to be an obvious study of territorial take over and psychological displacement. It is Flora’s sexual and maternal fulfilment. The tension between husband and wife is exposed through realistic creatures in the garden:

Flora and Edward are discovered sitting at the breakfast table. Edward is reading the paper.

Flora : Have you noticed the honey suckle this morning?
Edward : The what?
Flora : The honey suckle.
Edward : Honeysuckle? where?

(P.169)

It is an irritating situation for a reader of the daily newspaper. It is a display of discordance in married life. Edward employs a trivial method of trapping an alien creature, thus wishing to establish his dominance over his wife. Edward first ensures the wasp is inside the marmalade
- pot and then screws down the earthen ware lid. He tells Flora to put the wasp in the sink and drown it; she objects that it will ‘bite’ and that it is trying to crawl out through the spoon hole. Edward, the lord of the wasps, decides to go in for the kill.

Edward : Bring it out on the spoon and squash it on a plate.
Flora : It’ll fly away. It’ll bite.
Edward : If you don’t stop saying that word I shall leave this table.
Flora : But wasps do bite.
Edward : They don’t bite. They sting. It’s snakes... that bite.
Flora : What about horseflies?
Pause.
Edward : (to himself) Horseflies suck.

(P.173)

Finally Edward dispatches the wasp by pouring scalding water down the spoon hole, thereby blinding and killing it. Pinter, with great precision, is establishing the dominant motifs of the play and preparing the psychological ground for everything that follows. Edward’s response to the irritant wasp is to trap, dominate and neutralise it : exactly what he seeks to do with the match sells as the play progresses. For
Edward killing the wasp also symbolises an attempt to exert total control over his environment. It is no accident that when his personality eventually disintegrates before the sweating, half-blind, half-dead match-seller, he harks back nostalgically to a time when

Edward: I could pour hot water down the spoon-hole, yes, easily, no difficulty, my grasp firm, my command established, my life was accounted for...

(P.193)

The wasp-waste also exposes the crucial gulf between Flora and Edward, the latter is secure only when he can impose himself on his surroundings and Flora, whose very name invokes the goddess of flowers and whose opening lines are of a delighted curiosity about nature. Indeed, her reaction to the squashing of the wasp is:

What an awful experience. (P.174)

While Edward’s is:

What a beautiful day it is. (P.174)

Pinter establishes the governing themes of the play: marital discord, domestic disharmony, male bluster masking fierce
insecurity versus female compassion revealing a strong sense of self.

As Lois Gordon says that the thrust of all Pinter’s early plays is that the occupants of a room ‘project on to’ an intrusive stranger of their deepest fears. Riley, Goldberg and McCann, the blind match-seller, all function as screens upon which the characters externalize their own irrationality and that Pinter’s intruders are, in a sense, his technique for leading the characters to expose their true identities. But A Slight Ache is an exponent of devastating bourgeois marriage, and an exploration of the differing male and female responses to the threat of the unknown.

Pinter shows that Edward’s reaction to the match-seller – who represents the world of poverty and degradation, has specifically been denied – is one of the colonial appropriations making mortal terror. By inviting the match-seller into his study. Edward seeks to accommodate the match seller to his own values with results that are both comic and creepy.
At one point Pinter associates the match-seller with a country-house cricketer called cavendish, but Edward’s exasperation is obviously displayed in the following:

Perhaps you never met Cavendish and never played Cricket. You look less and less like a cricketer the more I see of you. Where did you live in those days? God damn it, I’m entitled to know something about you. You’re in my blasted house, on my territory, drinking my wine, eating my duck. Now you’ve had your fill you sit like a hump, a mouldering heap. In my room. My den. I can rem......(He stops abruptly.)

Pause.

You find that funny? Are you grinning?

(PP.194-195)

That’s a graphic demonstration of the way bourgeois assimilation quickly degenerates into blustering rage. It also precipitates the play’s final movement in which Edward retreats into a nostalgic vision of the past (‘I was number one sprinter at Howells’, he Pinterishly remarks). There is no explicit moral tag; but Pinter clearly implies that the male bourgeois ideal of control and order is based on the flimsiest moral foundations.
In contrast, Flora, like so many of Pinter’s women – has an instinctual warmth and sexual ardour that transcends the masculine preoccupation with status and power. Pinter’s women, on the whole, are much nicer than his men. As Pinter’s old friend from Hackney, Jennifer Mortimer remarks:

The wonderful thing about Harold is that he sees women as much stronger than they are. He gives them a power and generosity that most of them don’t have. He may romanticise them. But I think there is a child like joy in him that has never vanished. Women are included in it there are no bad thoughts about them.¹

That is certainly true in this play. For Edward, the match-seller represents a threat; for Flora, he embodies the sexuality and the motherhood she has been denied. It is clear that Flora is sexually aroused by the sight of the old tramp. And in her private encounter with him she associates him with her fantasy memories of an encounter with a rapacious poacher and, while complaining of his smell, seductively urges him to tell her all about love and promises him little toys to play with on his deathbed. Like Stanley for Meg in The Birthday Party, he becomes her surrogate lover and son.

¹
Pinter exposes the difference between the male and female principles, who highlight the psychic instability and unexpressed longings that lurk within bourgeois marriage and the pastoral ideal. One critic D. G. Brisdon, comments about the play that it invoked Ionesco, Ibsen and Melville, and that saw the match-seller as representing to Edward all his own unrealised potential and to Flora everything her husband had failed to become for her. The play also focuses upon the mounting anxiety of a central character Edward, who is a wealthy member of the upper-middle class family. Because of his neurotic anxiety he suffers from alienation and has lost right of his real self. Of the three characters in the play, only two speak. The third remains entirely silent and is thus invested with the terror of the unknown. Edward and Flora, an old couple, are disturbed by the mysterious presence of a match-seller at the back gate of their house. The match-seller has been standing there for weeks, holding his tray without ever selling anything.

Edward's bad temper and frequent outburst of hostility to Flora, his wife, testifies his increasing neurotic anxiety. The title of the play refers to Edward's difficulty with his eyes. But
it is an ironical title and it also refers to Edwards' false apprehension of himself. Pinter presents the motif of the "slight ache" in Edward's eyes in the following dialogue:

Flora : Have you got something in your eyes?
Edward : No, why do you ask?
Flora : You keep clenching them, blinking them.
Edward : I have a slight ache in them.
Flora : Oh, dear.
Edward : Yes, a slight ache. As if I hadn't slept.
Flora : Did you sleep Edward?
Edward : Of course, I slept uninterrupted. As always.
Flora : And yet you feel tired.
Edward : I didn't say I felt tired. I merely said I had a slight ache in my eyes.
Flora : Why is that, then?
Edward : I really don't know.

(Act I, P.172)

In the above dialogue "interrupted" suggests anxious alienation, lack of sexual experience, implying sexual inadequacy which often characterizes a rigid depressed personality like Edward's.

Edward is bad tempered intellectual and insecure. Pinter brings out Edward's existential situation in the wasp episode. It is his feeling of absurdity. Edward unconsciously identifies
its condition with his own. The reference to blindness of the wasp's suggests Edward's lack of perception and his existential blindness. The death of exhilaration, as Edward is able for the moment to imagine himself released from severe anxiety. His occupation as an essayist and intellectual is clearly a post and a false identity erected for his own benefit.

As Edward begins to regain his strength and his composure, he makes further allusions to his identity with the match-seller:

Flora : You're not still frightened of him?
Edward : Frightened of him? of him? Have you seen him?

Pause

He is like jelly.....

Flora : I'll tell you what. Look Let me speak to him. I'll speak to him. Edward and I know he knows I know it.

Flora : I'll find out all about him, Edward, I promise you I will.

Edward : And he knows I know.

(Act I, PP.188-189)

Edward's above speeches indicate that his view of the match-seller alludes to his own existential situations. (e.g. He can't see straight...)
Flora, on the other hand is sexually vital, and represents normative femininity in Pinter’s plays. Her attitude towards the match-seller is a mixture of sexuality and motherliness. She tells the match-seller,

I’m going to keep you, you dreadful chip, and call you Barnabas.

Edward is threatened and jealous of such attitude of Flora. Lucina Gabbard makes the following comment for the word “Barnabas” elucidating the significance:

Barnabas is the name of the man who sold his field and laid the money at the fact of the apostles to supply their physical needs (Act IV, PP.32-37). Ananias, by contrast, kept back part of the proceed from the sale of his property. Peter upbraided him for this deception saying : ‘You have not lied to me but to God’. When animals heard these words, he fell down and died.  

Barnabas stands for consolation, the supplying of need, and punishment for deception. The match-seller brings a promise of love and sexual gratification for Flora. Pinter seems to suggest that the match-seller is the younger and sexually vital self of Edward. Contact with the match-seller enlivens Flora, and she thinks that she recognises the match-seller
from the past when he was much younger. She vows to renew him by giving him a bath. The long paragraphical speech of Edward is a past reminiscences, a stream of consciousness in which he recollects his old vital and passionate days. He searches himself, his hard life in the past, but now his resources are at an end. He realizes the blank absurdity of his situation. Edward moves quickly towards his doom. He makes an implicit recognition of his identity with the match-seller and then reveals a moment of compassion for himself. The match-seller acts as a catalyst for the projection of other’s deepest feelings. Edward, in projecting his thoughts is confronted with his inner emptiness and disintegratedness, while Flora Projects her still vital sexuality and changes partners. The tragedy of A Slight Ache is that of humanity constricting itself.

The plays of Pinter do not develop a tragic structure, though they are fundamentally connected with tragic experience. No single protagonist is shown to decline from a state of high prosperity or happiness to one of acute sufferings and sorrows. His characters have been humbled long before we meet them. Suffering is a routine item and happiness is a
fantasy which these people persistently try to cultivate as a way of escape. Yet in their everyday suffering dies embedded with a profound perception is in that of the tragic protagonist. They keep adding to their suffering each day, though not by a major error as is the case with tragic heroes. As we witness in this play that the personal bond between Edward and Flora has sickened and now she wishes to leave him and forge some new relationship. At the end of the play she, therefore, places the tray of the match-seller on Edward's hand, and goes out with the old man.

(2) THE HOME-COMING — The Territorial Struggle:
Pinter's third full length play which bewildered the London audience and became a sensational success in America. The external action of play is both simple and baffling. Max, a retired butcher is about seventy years old, shares his large old house in the industrial areas of North London with two of his three sons: Lenny and Joey. Joey the youngest is an amateur boxer who hopes to become a professional but in the mean-time has a job with a demolition firm. He is slow of
speech and clumsy. Lenny, on the other hand, is sleek and intelligent has an uncertain occupation. Max's brother Sam, a hired taxi driver, is the fourth occupant of Max's house. Max talks a great deal of his boys' mother, Jessie, who is now dead. He also talks at length of his life long friend and companion MacGregor. He is also dead now. The sons, especially, Lenny, treat their father with contempt. The old man looks after the house and the occupants like a house wife and cooks for them too. There is a mystery about his late wife Jessie. Sam knows the mystery. During the night time when the occupants have gone to beds, some intruders come to house. Teddy, Max's third and eldest son, his wife Ruth visit the 'home'. They are the intruders.

The Caretaker was the play about intruders and intruded upon apparently as in The Room, The Birthday Party and The Slight Ache. Now the playwright Harold Pinter, has concentrated rather on psychological intrusion as in The Slight Ache. The Home-coming is a play about the physical and psychological terrains of relationship. It has two groups of social circles which come into conflict. It is from this nature that the play derives a remarkable vitality. 'Home' is
constructed in different ways by different characters, and the nature of the different constructions becomes manifest in the kinds of social structure that each of the characters seeks to impose on the others. These efforts encounter a variety of obstacles and include a variety of strategies, but all are worked out in terms of the potential social groupings that might embody a particular concept of the nature of the "home" and help it to endure.

The focus on "home" as a central factor in the characters' mode of interaction has given rise to a tendency to see the play exclusively in terms of family conflict. The play explores relationships in a family context, but it is in no way limited to the kinds of stereotypical relationships that prominent psychological, sociological, and anthropological theories have made widely known. The characters in the play are all confronted by family relationships, but they do not regard their companions solely in the light of that relationship. Rather, they bring with them into the family situation sets of attitudes derived from non-family relationships (e.g. careers) and are, throughout, concerned with family relationships.
only of the factors in the many inter-relational concerns that govern the interaction between themselves and others.

We have initially two families and later more references in the play. There is the family that Teddy left behind in London, the family that he has since formed in America, and the family that inhabits the home at the close of the play, not to mention the recurring echoes of previous generations.

Ruth: Don't you like your family?
Teddy: Which family?
Ruth: Your family here.
Teddy: Of course I like them.

What are you talking about?

(Act II, P.70)

An awareness of the variable application of the term “family” in the play is not only necessary to avoid misunderstanding, but is essential to any attempt to grasp the dynamics of the play. The play deals not just with the nature of homes but with the nature of home-coming. “Home” in this play becomes a particular kind of common ground upon which particular kinds of relationship can be built. To change the nature of that home is to change the range and kind of possibilities of self that can operate within that home. And in
that context, the creation of a home becomes a special case of
the generalization that covers much of the activity of
characters in all of Pinter's plays. The pursuit of
advantageous common ground is a means of establishing and
reinforcing desired relationships is, in the Pinter manoeuvre,
the key activity and central source of conflict as characters
seek to find a situation in which they can be what they wish
to be.

In this battle in a family home, the location calls attention to
the dual nature of a family home as both physical and
psychological common ground, and also to the dual nature of
the conflict in times of change. They are both a physical and
a psychological battle ground. In keeping with this duality,
the play's focus is on homecoming as an ongoing process,
which is reflected in the set. The opening description records
previous developments in the characters' efforts to impose a
particular conception of 'home' on the house that they all
share is:

An old house in North London. A large
room, extending the width of the stage.
The back wall, which contained the
door, has been removed; A square arch
shape remains. (Opening)²
When Teddy draws Ruth's attention to this change in the structure of the house, he links it immediately to a change in the nature of the home – the death of his mother. But he does so in terms that stresses the basic continuity of the structure in spite of the ugly renovation. In the process of home making the relationship between change and continuity becomes of considerable significance, and the set is a constant reminder of the kinds of stress that such adjustments can involve.

In fact Pinter said that a play was not an essay or a demonstration of an abstract theory. The Home-coming that deals with the duality and the strength of the female psyche, as against the sexual and emotional insecurity of the average male. Pinter doesn't work to a preconceived programme; but the same themes recur in play after play; particularly in the nations where women are more able than men to reconcile their sexual and social selves. In this play particularly the oedipal battle achieves its fulfilment. It also claims to be a fulfilment of women's unclaimed independence and the power of choice over how they live. It is not so much a Freudian battle as a mixture of sexual fantasy and feminist statement.
The Home-coming is partly about the disruptive effect of a female in Freudian theory on a misogynist, oppressively male household. Ruth in short is, the agent of change in a household obsessed with power, status, position; also one filled from the start with a strange, edgy ambivalence towards women.

Pinter shows all the men in the play, in fact, as sexually screwed up. Lenny exploits women as a pimp, as if exacting some permanent adolescent revenge against his own mother. Driven by filial hatred – and presumably because of the loss of the mother’s love – Lenny has turned all relationships with women into the commercially exploitative or the sentimentally violent. Although, Teddy is coming home, it is Ruth who seems to be stalking claim to the territory. The key point is that Ruth, in every single encounter, gains the tactical advantage – not only over Teddy, but just as importantly over Lenny. Ruth goes on to take the scene game, set and match. Her laconic replies to Lenny’s questions, her refusal to rise to his sparring insults or be provoked by his sexual manoeuvres goads him into self-revelations.
The scene reaches its climax in the famous moment when Lenny tries to snatch the glass of water from Ruth next to her chair:

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?"

(Act I, PP.49-50)

This is not just a battle of wills which Ruth wins. What Ruth is doing is stripping Lenny of his potency and exposing the bluster of his Purported violence towards women. Upto that point we have taken Lenny pretty much at face value as a dominant Petty thug. The ruthless Ruth however, exposes his terror of female sexuality. When she invites him to sit on her lap and put his head back while she pours the contents of the glass down his throat, she challenges him on two fronts; as a sexy woman and surrogate mother. Ruth almost throughout is cool, poised and unruffled. She is skilled at
using her sexuality as a weapon of control. Lenny is out manoeuvered by her. Max and Lenny are doomed to be helpless voyeur. The play is a form of oedipal wish-fulfillment and that Lenny’s desire to kill the father and find a mother—substitute has been gratified now that he has Ruth in his power. It is Ruth who has come home, who has rid herself of a suffocating husband, who has chosen the relative squalor of hackneyed life over the sterile cleanliness of American academia, and it is she who reconciled the supposedly incompatible roles of mother and whore. Ruth looks on her body rather as a landlord would look on a corner site. As soon as she has apparently been exploited sexually she really has the advantage because she owns the property.

Early in the play Teddy returns to a location which has in the past, synthesized for him certain possibilities of physical and psychological common ground, and it is evident that Teddy’s return to this location now is a return to the former in pursuit of the latter. But Teddy has another home that he has found with Ruth in America. While that home as a physical location is left behind in the united states, the emotional and psychological home of the couple travels with
them. In the process of re-defining the situation, the characters seek to re-define themselves and to reconsider or rebury possibilities of self that had become temporarily fixed or latent. And it is in the characters' return to confrontation with these issues that the significance of the title is most clearly revealed. In their various efforts to come home to each other, the characters are forced to struggle once more with what it means to come home to themselves.

Every other member of the family or household has commitments in the world outside, but the old, retired Max functions solely as father and focuses of the family group that he heads. The play glimpses the household issues of disagreement on which it begins. Max, who clearly lacks the physical ability to impose his will on Lenny, resorts to psychological manoeuvers which alternates between attempts to compete with Lenny and attempts to excuse himself for being unable to do so. These alternating approaches to Lenny are the first indications in the play of a major inconsistencies in the self-image of the man who is assigned the relational role of a father. In this role Max oscillates between emotional security and vulnerability. On the one hand he boasts of the
primacy of man's abilities as a home maker, and on the other, he manifests himself in terms of achievements in the world outside the home.

Max's estimates of his major role in life are evident in the early remarks to Lenny. First, he tries to compete with the image he feels Lenny has in the world outside:

You think I wasn't a tearaway? I could have taken care of you, twice over. I'm still strong.

(Act I, P.24)

And when Lenny's attention remains on the horse races in the newspaper, Max tries to claim expertise in this area, too:

I had a... I had an instinctive understanding of animals, I should have been a trainer. Many times I was offered the job – you know, a proper post, by the Duke of... I forgot his name... one of the Dukes.

(Act I, P.24)

While Lenny remains unimpressed by these claims, Max switches to claims of a rather different kind, and these claims are in the nature of both an excuse for failure in the world outside and an avowal of a different kind of success. The man who was one of "the worst hated men in the West End of
London" (P.8) emphasizes, at the same time, his claim to “a kind heart” (P.8) and the man who was so dexterous with horses explaining his lack of activity in that field by stressing a prior commitment to his family:

I had family obligations, my family needed me at home.

(Act I, P.26)

Max’s alternating concern for domestic and extra-domestic achievements is the major reason for the existence in the play of numerous references to the late MacGregor, the man Max might have been. In his admiration for rugged bachelor – philanderer MacGregor, and his simultaneous affirmation of the value of his chosen role of father and husband, Max maintains a fundamental duality that he is quite unable to reconcile. It is this inconsistency that is also the major factor in Max’s conflicting estimates of the late wife and sometimes laments:

Jessie... “... she wasn’t such a bad woman. Even though it made me sick just to look at her rotten stinking face, she wasn’t such a bad bitch. I gave her the best bleeding years of my life, anyway.

(Act I, P.25)
It is important to note, however, that Lenny is no more impressed by the role that Max claims to have fulfilled successfully than he is by the roles that Max claims he might have played successfully. And, in this rejection of Max’s domestic status, Lenny marks himself off from the members of the family who will subsequently appear. Lenny teases Max and says:

Why don’t you buy a dog? You’re a dog cook. Honest. You think You’re cooking for a lot of dogs.

(Act I, P.27)

Max is particularly sensitive towards such remarks and his vulnerability we perceive plays his psychological make up. In his role as head of the family he maintains a position of power that is not available anywhere else or in any other form. But paradoxically, this commitment to the family as a sphere in which he can still wield power is also a commitment that renders Max subject to the power of others. Lenny, well aware of Max’s weakness, and Max’s needs, is ready to exploit them to the full. Not in the least dependent on the family he lives with, Lenny is in a position to use Max’s needs as a means of controlling him. And this, of
course; is the reverse of What Max hopes to achieve by Lenny in the role of son.

This opening glimpse of the London family reveals a situation far removed from any abstract ideal of a social group with shared needs and reciprocal responsibility. Instead, these are distorted into a system of mutual exploitation as Lenny and Max seek to manipulate each other for individual, rather than family, ends. And the notion of family structure as something given rather something constantly under negotiation is heavily undermined in this explicit confrontation between father and son:

Max: Well, get out! What are you waiting for?

Lenny looks at him.

Max

Lenny: What did you say?

Max: I said shove off out of it, that's what I said.

Lenny: You'll go before me, Dad, if you talk to me in that tone of voice.

(Act I, P.27)

These callous attempts by Max and Lenny to exploit each other prepare the way for Teddy's return in search of something he needs, rather than something the family needs. But more important this opening conflict raises many
questions about the kinds of benefit that Teddy might hope to find in returning to his old family home.

Sam's relationship with Lenny seems initially more harmonious than the relationship that Max has with Lenny. But it soon becomes clear that he also becomes a butt of mockery of Lenny. Max also grabs a chance to belittle his brother where he (Sam) boasts of his skilful driving. Max cannot see anyone promising himself or herself, and he readily joins in the game plan of Lenny to mock Sam.

Joe, like Sam and Lenny, is dressed for a role outside of the house and throws off his jacket as he enters. Like Sam, too, he is quick to direct the conversation toward his abilities in the world outside. Joey, it seems, is a boxer, and Max reacts to this ability with a mixture of the strategies he employed in dealing with Sam and Lenny. On the one hand he defends himself against his own inadequacies by mocking the pugilistic skills of Joey, and on the other hand he seeks to boost his own image by claiming expertise in another of the areas that claim the attention of his sons:
Max: I'll tell you what you've got to do. What you've got to do is you've got to learn how to defend yourself, and you have got to learn how to attack. That's your only trouble as a boxer. You don't know how to defend yourself, and you don't know how to attack. Pause.

Once you're mastered those arts you can go straight to the top.

(Act I, PP.33-34)

With all four members of the family presented there has yet to appear any manifestation of generosity or sympathy within the assembled a group. The whole family structure seems based less on mutual sharing than on mutual exploitation. And, ironically, the exploitation falls most severely on the head of the one most responsible for keeping the group together. Max, the core of the family, its nominal head, brings nothing to the family from outside and consequently is expected to provide the most in fulfilling necessary functions inside. Where he sees the role of head of the family as the focus of everyone else's giving, they, consistently enough, and ironically enough, perceive him as the source of all benefits that a family ought to bestow on them. As head of the family, he is regarded as the one responsible for providing home
comforts, and Max, who clings tenaciously to the status, is caught resentfully in the trap of having also to provide the benefits.

Joey : Feel a bit hungry.
Sam : Me, too.
Max : Who do you think I am, your mother? Eh?
    Honest. They walk in here every time of the day and night like bloody animals.
    Go and find yourself a mother.

(Act I, P.32)

Lenny, ever alert to the possibilities of mocking the other members of the family, aims his guns at Max:

Lenny : What the boys want, Dad, is your special brand of cooking, Dad. That’s what the boys look forward to.
    The special understanding of food, you know, that you’ve got.

(Act I, P.33)

Max’s tolerance in staying put up as the head of the family has cost him perpetual agony of mockery. Max’s leadership is neither necessary nor successful, nor greatly desired. It exists in the absence of an alternative, indeed, in the place of a lost alternative, it is the replica of late wife Jessie, and it is
obviously an effort to preserve the continuity of the family after her death.

With the arrival of Teddy and Ruth, the American family is appropriately presented before the London family. Teddy after his marriage to Ruth returns to his old place London for the first time to his former self in his former home. His appearance suggests a change from that former self, but the key and his presence are claims to a continuity that has Teddy seething with a nervous excitement an excitement that is clearly not shared by Ruth:

Teddy : Shall I go up and see if my room’s still there?
Ruth : It can’t have moved.
Teddy : No, I mean if my bed’s still there.
Ruth : Some might be in it.

(Act I, P.36)

As Ruth points out the probability of change. Teddy’s tenacious clinging to his belief in the continuity of the home suggests that this is a vital factor in his decision to return there.

There is an ominous hint in this connection that the continuity Teddy returns in search of indeed exists but not in

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the form that Teddy has envisaged. As Ruth perceives the pre-dominance Teddy gives to his role of son over his role as husband, Ruth switches from indifference to return.

Ruth : Do you want to stay?
Teddy : Stay?

Pause.

We've come to stay. We're bound to stay... for a few days.

Ruth : I think... the children... might be missing us.

(Act I, PP.37-38)

But Teddy remains adamant, in the face of his objections. Ruth quickly gives way. Her commitment to her duties as a mother and as a wife seems as tentative as those of Teddy to his role as husband.

There are signs from the beginning of the play that Lenny holds a rather odd position in this home. His attitude to the other members of the family is almost exclusively one of mockery, and he alone is willing to defy consistently and explicitly the claims of his father to superior status. For Lenny, home as a physical and psychological common ground with others is weighted very much toward the former.
If Teddy is returning in search of some kind of continuity, he is confronted, in Lenny with a man more interested in change. Teddy has achieved a particular kind of prestige in the public world and his father, is defensive about the ways in which other people’s success might reflect on him:

My goodness, we’re proud of him here. I can tell you. Doctor of philosophy and all that... leaves quite an impression.

(Act I, P.47)

Lenny seems anxious to impress upon Ruth that he, too, is a man of some expertise in the realm of male/female relationships. In these compensatory gestures; Lenny reveals vulnerabilities vis-a-vis Teddy that he has never revealed in his relationship with other members of the family. Threatened by what is not understood; Lenny rapidly shifts to the defensive manoeuver of story telling – a manoeuver reminiscent of Davies’ efforts in The Caretaker. But Ruth, unlike Aston, understands perfectly what Lenny is trying to achieve and demolishes his long-winded narratives with brief, carefully chosen questions.
Focussing the conflict on her glass of water, she first establishes herself as an authority figure by treating Lenny as a wayward child and then confronts him with the power of the female sexuality that his stories have been designed to diminish:

Lenny : And now perhaps I'll relieve you of your glass.
Ruth : I haven't quite finished.

Pause.
Lenny : Don't call me that, please.
Ruth : Why not?
Lenny : That's the name my mother gave me.
Pause.
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?

(Act I, PP.49-50)
Ruth clearly victorious, disappears, but her authoritarian treatment of Lenny has struck chords in the memory of a previous relationship in the same house with another woman – his mother, Jessie. In her efforts to establish that control, she has exhibited characteristics that make it clear that she, like Lenny, is not circumscribed by the roles assigned to her in the family structure to which she currently belongs.

Max, having ascertained that Ruth is not just a woman but also a mother of three children, is ready to look upon his errant son in a new light. Realizing that Teddy, too, is a father, Max approaches him with a reminder of continuity of the family tradition that Teddy has come home to rediscover:

Max : Teddy, Why don't we have a nice cuddle and kiss, eh? Like the old days? What about a nice cuddle and kiss, eh?

(Act I, P.59)

Teddy, delighted at this confirmation of continuity at home, is oblivious to the possible inconsistency between the self that is operative in this situation and the self that is operative in his American family. He reverts to behaviour that is very
different from that of the cool, analytical philosopher who had earlier confronted Lenny:

Teddy : Come on, then.
       Come on.
       Pause.
Max : You still love your Dad, eh?
Teddy : Come on, Dad. I'm ready for the cuddle.
Max : He still loves his father!

(Act I, PP.59-60)

For Max, Teddy's willingness to reinforce his status as head of the household and his readiness to uphold the importance of family ties is justification enough for complete acceptance. But Teddy's role in this reconciliation brings to culmination a series of steps toward the re-discovery of his former home. In encouraging this rather excessive male greeting he is trying to re-immersce himself in a past that he once quit. Basic to that past is a home dominated by a father figure – a role that he himself is now called upon to play in his American family. As the two male heads of the two households kiss and cuddle in the old family room, Teddy's identification of the father and home is complete. But in the starting revelation that Teddy, like Max, has three sons, the significance of the continuity
that Teddy has come home to find is clarified. There is a strong implication that Teddy’s deference to the authority of the father—figure is born, not of a wish to shore up his father’s status, but to shore up his own. Teddy’s homecoming, it seems, has a motive that is consistent with those under-lying the behaviour of all the members of this household—a manifest of self concern.

As echoes register in Max’s psyche, he turns to his new ally, the other family head, Teddy. And Teddy, sharing Max’s interests in this respect, is quick to support his efforts to characterize Ruth as an eminently suitable wife. While Ruth is indeed coming home to a former self, she does not come home to a situation in which that self can easily flourish. Her task here is to create the home in which that self might operate, and she, like Teddy, needs an ally here to achieve that goal.

Moving from defense to attack, Ruth begins to seek out that ally by hinting that there is more to her than the “nice girl” image that it currently suits Max and Teddy to bestow upon her.
Ruth: I was... different... when I met Teddy... first.

(Act II, PP.66)

As Teddy hastily denies this, we perceive once again the battle over role assignment that has characterized both family groups. Ruth's interest in her former self clashes with her current family role as markedly as Teddy's interest in his former self had done earlier in the play.

The two heads of the two families find that their problems are not alleviated by their alliance at all, but are instead moving toward a crisis, Teddy finds an adversary in Lenny, and Max in rest of the members. For Teddy, who identifies home with Max, that identification has taken on an ironic twist. Teddy, it seems, has come home not to a new solution but to an old family problem. And while this clearly fills him with dismay, his nervous uncertainty is in marked contrast to the growing relaxation of his enigmatically smiling wife. One by one, the problems of mutual exploitation, role assignment, and domestic versus extra domestic concerns take on a critical significance in the American family, too.

Earlier it was Teddy who wished to stay and Ruth who wished to leave; now it is Teddy who suggests leaving and
Ruth who queries the necessity for it. Earlier Teddy was ready to put his obligations to the London family above those to his American family; now it is Ruth who asserts that order of priority.

Ruth : Don’t you like it here?
Teddy : Of course I do. But I’d like to go back and see the boys now.
Pause.
Ruth : Don’t you like your family?
Teddy : Which family?
Ruth : Your family here.
Teddy : Of course I like them. What are you talking about?

(Act II, P.70)

But Teddy does indeed know what Ruth is talking about, and Ruth has once again zeroed in on the most vulnerable point in an adversary’s position. Teddy, trapped in a conflict between personal need and family duty, is confronted with the reverse of the situation he had envisaged on returning home.

Instead of a reinforcement of his role as head of the family, he is discovering a further weakening of it. But equally important is Ruth’s awareness that, in the London home, she
now has Teddy in the very dilemma that has dominated her life in the American home. Remorselessly, Ruth forces Teddy to face up to an unreconcilable duality within himself.

In his remarks Teddy concedes the inconsistency between the self that he envisages operating in the London home and the self that now operates outside it. And in this clash between his role as son and his role in America, Teddy comes home to his father's basic problem of an inability to reconcile domestic and extra domestic roles. But unlike Max, Teddy has two homes to choose from and he tries to save the situation by suggesting an amiable solution to Ruth:

Teddy: I'll have your case, Ruth.

(Act II, P.95)

Ruth, on the other hand, slowly coming to terms with a self she had abandoned, is now in the process of creating the environment in which that self might flourish.

Encouraged by Lenny's sympathetic response, Ruth begins to explore a further potential common ground between them: a shared professional interest. After years of subordinating her professional expertise to Teddy's, Ruth is now able to discuss
that expertise with a listener who does not regard it as unmentionable at all. For Lenny, whose profession has also seemed unmentionable in the family home, this is likewise a major break through. A new and embryonic family is emerging here with the possibility of achieving what none of the other families have thus far achieved the weilding of domestic and extra-domestic concerns. But it is purely tentative adjustment which suits to both the partners.

As bestower of sexual benefits upon the assembled males, Ruth is quick to assert the other side of the domestic coin, she demands for more power, too. With masterly irony, Pinter concludes Ruth's first usurpation of Max's power position with a reversal of the conflict that had prompted Ruth's rebellion against him as shown earlier. As Ruth demonstrates her control over Max's sons, she also seeks to impose on him the domestic role he had tried to demand of her – that of the house cook. With the power of her sexuality now paramount in the London home, Ruth needles Teddy by drawing an implicit contrast between the power of her professional expertise and the power of his in the current situation.
For too long Ruth has had to submerge her professional abilities in the demands of her role as wife and mother in the American home. Her professional expertise has been subordinated to the need for Teddy to pursue his. Now the situation is reversed, and it is Teddy's professional abilities, not Ruth's, that are redundant here. Ruth, a model for the body, is dominant in an environment that has no use for the man with a model mind.

Teddy, like Ruth, carries with him the psychological home that he has embraced, and this psychological home effectively cuts him off from control of family affairs. Ruth has been unable to reconcile her career as nude model with her role as wife and mother, so Teddy has now come to the point of facing up to his inability to reconcile the self that is the successful professor of philosophy and the self who is either a dutiful son in London or a dutiful father and husband in America. Teddy can win here neither by silence nor by participation. The attack upon him culminates with a key suggestion by Lenny that Ruth be retained for both her domestic and professional expertise. It is Lenny's suggestion that Ruth become a prostitute, and it is to Lenny that the
family now turns in seeking advice on the workability of the arrangement. Teddy, struggling for control, responds weakly to his father’s query about Ruth’s sexual abilities, and Lenny steps into the breach with all the conviction of a man speaking with professional authority:

Lenny: I'm giving you a professional opinion.

(Act II, P.89)

Teddy, withdrawing more and more into his psychological home, manifests the strength of negation. Unable to cope with the domestic scene, he concedes what he cannot control. As Teddy departs with a photograph of his father, he confirms his fundamentally selfish nature in his reaction to the sudden collapse of Sam.

Ruth’s ironic farewell to Teddy; Don’t become a stranger, (Act II, P.96) underlines the fact that, in this respect at least, Teddy still has roots in the home he is once again quitting. In quitting her life with Teddy, Ruth returns to an aspect of self she had rejected with some qualms, once before in her life. Ruth has achieved a certain kind of freedom.

Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson point out:
To reinterpret The Home-coming solely in terms of 'love and 'frustrated emotion' would, however, be a wasted exercise. The play is too rich a brew to be reduced to a single flavour.¹

The four main protagonists (the father and son, Max and Lenny, the husband and wife, Teddy and Ruth) engage in the course of the play in a series of pitched verbal battles, leading towards the family's absorption of the alien body, Ruth, who finally agrees to desert her own American family and becomes a prostitute. In Pinter's world, social control lies ultimately in the power to impose one's language on another and this is established remarkably in this play. Pinter has indeed remarked that:

The only play which gets remotely near to a structural entity which satisfies me is The Home-coming, and 'to get the structure right', as he puts it, has always been his major dramatic concern.²

In this play the fight for possession of the tongue is in opposition to the fight for possession of the soul. In fact, the playwright seems determined to stamp out the inner world of the soul, of intimate thoughts, of memories and desires.
Everything happens on the surface, at the skin level; but behind the skin there is the skull, and inside the skull there are ideas, emotions, feelings, amorous longings. In other words, Pinter is the only writer who has transformed psychological depth and inwardness into an insult. Irving Wardle observes:

The Home-coming articulates a bestial fight for territorial struggle and supremacy with the characters resorting to basic animalistic defenses such as fight, flight and mimetism in order to survive.3

The play has references to Ruth as a nymphomaniac; Jessie as an immoral woman; Teddy’s concerns about the ‘gossip-ridden campus’; Ruth’s unwillingness to go with Joey. She wants to avoid a ‘tedious or unsatisfactory sexual relationship’ has some realistic interpretations in The Home-coming. Irving Wardle points out:

The play’s title refers to her, not to Teddy. It is no home-coming for him; whereas she (even distrusting her probably untrustworthy statement that she was born nearby) is instantly on home ground. Teddy, however, has a legitimate claim to belonging there, which she has not. And the main action of the piece shows her taking possession
Ruth invades the territory with full vigour, though male dominated household, in which Max and Lenny bully her, does not deter her. She challenges Lenny’s aggressiveness by sexual encounters. Teddy has already been edged out of the combat. For Ruth, America is, now, a desert populated only by insects; it is not an environment that supports animal life. The dirt and aggression of the London house provide the environment she needs. She has sex to offer and the family members of Teddy have the territory, and in the end they strike a deal. Sexually she retains the whip hand – a point which Pinter emphasizes in the last scene when the apparently victorious Max falls on his knees begging for attention from her. She is the queen bee, not the captive. Her own tactics are absolutely clear. She wants to translate sexual power into real estate, and she does so by specifying precisely the property she desires. She is the winner of the territories. Max’s falling on the knees, whimpering and moaning for kiss from Ruth is the limit of degradation, depravation and perversion.
Max: I'm not an old man. 
(He looks up at her)
Do you hear me? 
(He raises his face to her)
Kiss me.
(She continues to touch Joey's head, lightly, Lenny stands, watching.)

(Act II, PP.97-98)

In the play each member of family looks to his or her own advantage using whatever weapons - cunningness, virility or intelligence, even authority (as Max does). Max, Lenny, Ruth and Joey are depraved and fallen characters. But Sam, the brother of Max maintains his virtuous identity and sleeps through the scene. Teddy has another virtuous identity and leaves for America without any much fuss. This is an example of different poles of identities in the play.

**HYPOTHESIS:**

The plays discussed in this chapter have little less violence. The theme of dispossession is conspicuous in both - the plays illustrated here. The common factor is language in command in both the plays. Psychological torture and sex
images gain prominence in these dramas discussed here. The contemporary social reference and the humiliation of low life in an advanced technological society have also been focussed with as much poignancy and feeling as the concept of nihilism, of the absurdity of life in general.
REFERENCES:

(1) A Slight Ache:


2. Ibid, P.79.

(2) The Home-coming:


2. In "An interview with Lawrence M. Bensky", P.103.
