Segundo Curso
Textos Literarios Ingleses I
Groups 2 and 4
Harold Pinter and *The Homecoming*

Outline

In 1958 I wrote the following:
"There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.” I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false? (Harold Pinter)

The play, *The Homecoming*, might be considered a Comedy of Menace; characters always feel threatened (by the truth, by confrontations, etc).
Pinter's plays are also sometimes called the “Drama of Non-Communication.”
It represents the difficulty of human communication; language is used to evade and not to reveal.
Characters are afraid of communication; avoid self-revelation, avoid direct contact: language is a shield/defence rather than a form of contact.
Characters play games to avoid contact or the consequences of confrontation or conflict (rituals and routine).
*The Homecoming* questions the certainties of both the characters and the audience regarding their understanding of the characters' identities and their relationships. Expectations are continually and ironically undermined.
What characters do with language is more important than what they say (to threaten, challenge, avoid contact/conflict, counter-challenge, etc.). Silence is more expressive than spoken language. Why characters speak is more important than what they say to each other: under what is said something else is being said.
Silence creates ambiguity, uncertainty and suggests the impenetrability of the individual: it is impossible to know characters; it is impossible for them to know each other (or themselves?). Truth is uncertain.
The use of cliché and social formulae is continual; there are many repetitions, etc. And all forms part of a game or series of games. As in Beckett we recognise routines and rituals which become habitual.
Communication is always forced; characters are always acting, playing a part.
Characters often provoke then avoid challenges and confrontations; communication is forced, both desired and undesired; they apparently seek but inevitably avoid contact.
Relationships are public and social as opposed to personal and emotional; this corresponds perhaps to the oppositions between appearance and reality, language and silence.
The triviality of conversations reflects the emptiness of relationships; individuals feel threatened by the very existence of relationships; paradoxically they seek and avoid contact at the same time: the result is irony.

Our vision of the nature of the relationships is continually undermined; we discover the importance of illusions and of lying; characters fear ignorance, they are afraid of not knowing things, about the past, about each other; about their own relationships (family/sentimental).

However, paradoxically and ironically they are afraid of finding out, and of being found out themselves: they are afraid finding out: will change their fictitious vision of the truth.

Essentially, the truth for these characters is a fictitious construct.

Hence, the need for reassurance about their idea of truth, the past, of each other of their identity: they remind each other of what they have in common; the past and what it has never been.

The past often cannot be verified and is probably invented by some of the characters (Max in particular, but Sam too and even Lenny).

Characters constantly refer back to the past which is often a way of reassuring themselves about their position or role within the family (authority, etc.).

They also need to be reassured regarding what is true or the reality of the situation; they all desire to have their assertions approved of or ratified: they all need approval; they all fear disapproval.

Characters deliberately fool each other, but also fool themselves until they are found out, but even then continue to dissimulate, to live the lie (Max insists he is not an old man, for example).

All relationships are a simulacrum of intimacy and communication. The characters have to hold on to the illusion in spite of everything.

The apparent betrayal of Ruth should not be considered as such because there has been no true intimacy or real fidelity.

Characters play a part; the real self is hidden and the self becomes the role. Characters only exist in terms of the role they play: father, son, brother, husband, wife, lover, whore, mother...

Characters also fulfill different roles, often in terms of the context of the relationship or the confrontation that takes place.

Personal identity is a fictitious construct, like the past itself.

Characters are not intimate: ironically they are all strangers.

The irony of Ruth’s remark: “Don’t become a stranger.”

Characters go through rituals and routines to maintain the status quo in their fictitious relationships.

Civilised activities cover up real animosity, desires, appetites, etc.

Characters talk and are polite to avoid showing true feelings, to cover up indifference or dislike, absence of affection, etc.
The things people don't say: under what is said something else is being said. Territory and possessions are important; objects sometimes become the focus of personal conflicts. The room becomes symbolic; a threat to one’s territory, intimacy or notion of what is true may take place. The fantasies and desires of the characters invade reality: their lives are a fiction; they invent the past to conserve their position. Characters see through each other but continue to play the game in order to avoid conflict and preserve the status quo. They require the saving illusion of their past, the roles they play, the simulation of intimacy. Conflict and confrontation is usually avoided as this would lead to revealing the truth; when this happens characters continue to behave as if nothing has happened, they continue with the ritual, the routine. Characters avoid the truth through language; it is used to cover up, dissimulate, as a form of defence. But it is also used as a weapon. The civilised behaviour of characters covers up their selfishness; everyone acts out of their own self-centredness and a sense of rivalry (or don't they?). The play is essentially ironic as what characters understand to be the truth/reality, particularly about the nature of their relationships and each other, turns out to be mistaken. One possible interpretation is to see the series of conflicts in The Homecoming as a struggle for dominance in which Ruth is ultimately the best player, finally dominating the males through sex and language.
From Act Two, we find the apparently happy family united over food and drinks in a social gathering where misunderstandings have been swept away, but this is ironic as the duality of appearance and reality is once more apparent here; that is characters are keeping up appearances to cover up underlying desires, conflicts, etc.

The text shows the ritualistic nature of everyday experience as well as drawing attention to the fear and animosity that underlie the observance of social decorum.

Basically, the text is about the struggle of an individual to communicate and his failure to do so, or to assert himself. It is about the failure to justify oneself and the failure to ward off the threat or menace that Teddy feels directed towards him by all the others, including his wife, Ruth.

However, the text is ambiguous and has more than one level of interpretation. What is said is not all-important; the dramatic situation must also be considered.

The text, or scene, follows one of several anti-climactic points in the play when violence or a confrontation have been avoided, although this is only temporary and we have the beginning of another scene which rises towards a possible climax. Therefore, there is obvious tension here and the audience is probably aware that each of the characters is playing a part, or role (part of their desire to observe decorum).

A literal interpretation of the text would involve the belief that characters show real concern for one another (Ruth for Teddy’s position in the family, Max for his oldest son, Joey and Lenny for the comfort of the rest) but this is simply an attempt to keep up appearances and is one of the sources of irony in the play. Moreover, each behaves as if nothing had happened earlier (Max’s comments about Ruth being a tart and Lenny and Ruth’s meeting) which is suggestive of hypocrisy. Because of what we know, we can suggest that Teddy sees through all this and interprets, as we do, what is said and done in a different way. We should remember that what is important is not what the characters say, but what they do with language, their underlying intention.

Ruth asks a leading question which may be interpreted as a sarcastic comment on Teddy’s critical works as such. She begins the exchange and therefore manages the situation.
Max’s response could suggest disappointment at not having read them, but this is ambiguous and may suggest apathy or a “couldn’t care less” attitude.

Max here tries to impose himself in the conversation and his remark can be looked at in two ways: as simply a helpful remark to keep the conversation or as a potentially threatening invitation to find out more about Teddy’s works. Teddy sees it as threatening and feels himself challenged by both Ruth and Max. He reacts with a counterchallenge, stating they wouldn’t understand his works, trying to impose his intellectual superiority, which is continually undermined anyway.

The other characters remain calm and simply ignore Teddy’s remark (which has been a challenge to the others), keeping up appearances and the ritual of drinks and food. This, however, could also be considered as a snub. Teddy accepts the drink passively but reacts further by taking up from where he left off as no one has accepted his challenge. This suggests that Teddy now stands alone, metaphorically, and is separate from the rest set apart and in an attitude of confrontation with the family, something which is borne out by what he now says.

However, he fails to take control of the situation and proves, at least on the surface, to be intellectually and, particularly, linguistically incompetent. In terms of the latter, he repeats the same idea in a different way continually, he hesitates, becomes vague and ambiguous, and the coherence of what he says gradually breaks down.

However, what he says does have a point. It reinforces that idea that he is different from the rest and suggests that they are unable to act on things: i.e. their situation remains the same, they are involved in an ongoing ritual and are unable to see it, a ritual which they can or will not change and Teddy, perhaps ironically, believes that as he can observe it, he will not become irrecoverably involved in it. It is true that he leaves at the end of the play (he has remained free), but he has been unable to affect the situation (he has failed in the conflict). The in-on dichotomy may have to do with activity and passivity although he is ironically passive in the face of these circumstances (his wife sides with his family against him). However he does see it coming and is able to escape from it.

The ontological question about the nature of reality and the epistemological one about how we see it, come in here too. It seems that they really do belong to different worlds, which is underlined by expressions like “You just . . . move about. I can observe it. I can see what you do.” There is an opposition between I versus you, even I versus “All of you” which sums up the nature of the situation and anticipates the final outcome, that Teddy doesn’t belong there but Ruth does.
Teddy’s speech is received passively; in fact they just ignore him. There is a paradox involved in this passive antagonism. Similarly, we can observe the affection on the surface, antagonism underneath and the continual struggle to manage or dominate the situation (Ruth does and Teddy tries and of course fails). The egoism or self interest of the characters comes in here too. Each is in his own world in spite of keeping the ritual going. Like objects the do just move around here, ignoring what the others say, interrupting and so on.

Communication takes place but at the instinctive level of threat, challenge, counter-challenge, acceptance or resignation, while verbal communication apparently fails. Hence we see conversations being interrupted the wrong interlocutor answering or being ignored and so on.

In a more general sense, the scene (and the play) is about what Teddy says, about being able to see and describe the world you live in rather than passively accepting of what seems to be an imposed ritual which the characters are unaware of.

The language is mainly colloquial with contracted verb forms, although Teddy begins to use more academic formal terms with latin roots like “intellectual equilibrium”, “capacity”, etc. However, this is also ironic as his attempt to communicate through language finally breaks down into hesitation and repetition of the same idea; he even uses phrases where there is pronoun deletion which suggests that he is unable to get above their level or at least win this exchange (“might do you good”).

So, in the end, Teddy tries to justify what he appears to be (a professor) and to dominate intellectually the proceedings in accordance with his established role, but he fails here and throughout the play, which is part of the irony. Perhaps, however there are other ways of interpreting this ambiguous text. Teddy doesn’t get “lost in it”, he escapes back to the States where his children are. His speech may be considered as a justification and explanation of the fact that he realises what has been going on and that he wants to keep out of it.

One more thing worth mentioning is that in this text as in the rest of the play, characters are struggling to explain (or in other parts avoiding it). Teddy is a case in point here and we find that the others just don’t want to know.

Many discourse markers show the need to feel contact (I mean, etc), but that contact is so often avoided, as it is here, with the intention of putting the other character down, or simply hurting his feelings.
Bibliography


A few websites of interest:

[www.haroldpinter.org](http://www.haroldpinter.org)

[www.bedfordstmartins.com/litlinks/drama/pinter.htm](http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/litlinks/drama/pinter.htm)

[www.kirjasto.scifi/hpinter.htm](http://www.kirjasto.scifi/hpinter.htm)