



“The lover” by Harold Pinter: Conflict of Interests

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Abstract

The main theme in “the lover” by Harold Pinter is the conflict between gender role attitudes, a conflict of interest, a situation in which a married couple make uncanny decisions. This paper explores how traditional gender role attitudes in a middle-class family impact the conflict between love and pleasure in Richard and how they provoke a reciprocal reaction from Sarah. Sarah aims to bring peace by playing diverse roles and expects Richard to do the same. Richard’s roles, as both a lover and a husband, are in conflict with each other since he sees Sarah as a whore at a time and looks out for her dignity, elegance and wit at another time. Subject to a number of thinkers who speak of marriage, sex and gender roles, this article offers some insights into patriarchal capitalism applied to the potential of Harold Pinter’s *the lover*. The results provide the readers with a new perspective for understanding the persistence of gender equality in a middle-class household and have implications for sexual politics.

Key words: Gender roles; Conflict; Sexual desire; Middle-class family

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Views about marriage tend to differ according to class. It seems that before 1960s, there was not a liberal attitude

toward women’s roles, and female sexuality would be suppressed widely, especially in a middle-class family. Sexual morality condemned female sexual desire even in their expression of feeling while tolerating the similar actions for men. Some traditional perspectives and their interconnected standard morality deprived women of their natural sexual life, which resulted in the subjection of women in their married life. Overall, the gender roles were stereotyped and women were expected to be sexually inexperienced, flirtatious and accepting.

The Lover written in the same period of Pinter’s career, grasp with the changing sexual mores of the 1960s and mark a distinct move in Western drama toward postmodernism and the removal of the meta-narrative. Joshua Ruebl (2013) in an essay, “Rituals of Gender and Power in the Plays of Harold Pinter”, concluded that:

The Lover is a metaphor for the decline of patriarchal power in the modern world and the character of Sarah represents the rise in power of the new modern woman. This power is replaced by the “feminine mystique” and is also representative of changes happening in the society of the 1960’s and a new liberal attitude toward women and their roles in the culture. The author added that in *The Lover* we see female sexual desire upset the equilibrium in a repressed bourgeois household. (p.3)

“Feminine mystique” coined by Betty Friedan (1963) was the voice of the women of the era, the women who were unsatisfied and could not put their feeling into words. Sarah, *The Lover*’s housewife, is one of those women. Sarah, however, tries well not to be ignored and caged in the domestic sphere. She directs and depicts a scenario that includes a new role for both herself and Richard, her husband, who symbolizes the era’s men with a conflict of interests. Richard expects a witty and graceful wife while hoping her flirtatious character in their sexual life.

The couple’s double existence in the newly-made scenario develops a new idea, a fantasy world through which Sarah uses a new language that would be called

a taboo subject at the time the play was being written. Harold Pinter (1962), in a speech at National Student Drama Festival, states that his characters’ language clearly carries a strong and hidden meaning:

Language is a highly ambiguous business. So often, below the word spoken, is the thing known and unspoken. Between my lack of biographical data about my characters and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said.

The open, still ambiguous, exchange of words between Richard and Sarah subject to their new roles as a lover and as a whore, all concerning sexual desire, manifest the characters’ real interests; the mystery of these real interests can be unraveled through what is said by the lover, Max, and a whore, which could not be said by the bourgeois couple openly. Harold Pinter creates a dynamic situation in which a woman dares to speak of her sexual desire, and the contemporary reader should be intelligent enough to read between the lines, particularly the lines by the whore, which seems challenging as well as benevolent. By taking the role of a whore, Sarah reveals her yearning for sex, or more realistically for lusting, in her language, what has already been banned by moral standards. Challenging the view that young women ought to conform to society’s expectations by concealing their sexual pleasure in the domestic life, Sarah urges Richards to play a game, a play-within-a-paly. This new play helps Sarah to struggle for power and maintain gender balance in their married life.

In an excerpt from *Minimizing Marriage* (2012), Elizabeth Brake comes to this conclusion in the light of some critiques:

Suspicion arises that the belief in the moral value of marriage is merely ideological, a tool of patriarchal capitalism. How, indeed, could the exclusive, possessive, legal institution of marriage fosters the goods of love and care associated with it? To what extent does its subordination of individual desire to duty and the perceived common good threaten the good of individuals? And in light of its origins in force and the legal subordination of women, can any marriage law be just? We can now embark on answering these questions. (p.124)

Brake believes that marriage is illiberal and unjust by its very nature as it subordinates women legally. It can be implied that the form of marriage forces women to be prone to please their men; pleasing the marriage partner is women’s moral duty while the opposite is not regarded as an obligation.

Richard kisses Sarah on her cheek and not her lips in the first scene to show that he is not in love with her. Richard starts asking Sarah questions about a lover and her appointment with him and the time they spent together while he was at work. Richard asks questions one after another; he wants to know how she has spent her day. He is doubtful about Sarah’s activities during the day. Richard casts doubts on his own beliefs as well.

Richard: Pleasant day?
Sarah: Mmm. I was in the village this morning.
Richard: Oh yes? See anyone?
Sarah: Not really, no. Had lunch.
Richard: In the village?
Sarah: Yes.
Richard: Any good?
Sarah: Quite fair.
Richard: What about this afternoon? Pleasant afternoon?
Sarah: Oh yes. Quite marvelous.
Richard: Your lover came, did he?
Sarah: Mmmn. Oh yes.
Richard: Did you show him the hollyhocks?
Sarah: The hollyhocks?
Richard: Yes.
Sarah: No, I didn’t.
Richard: Oh.
Sarah: Should I have done?
Richard: No, no. It’s simply that I seem to remember your saying he was interested he was interested in gardening.
Sarah: Mmmn, yes, he is. Not all that interested, actually.
Richard: Ah. Did you go out at all, or did you stay in? (p.151)

Richard continues asking questions and imagines what has happened between the lover and Sarah in the afternoon. In fact, by imagining the situation, events and all circumstances of that time in that room between the lover and Sarah, he looks for pleasure, a strong hedonistic desire for sex; He starts an erotic dialogue, an erotic fantasy.

Richard: The thing is it gets so awfully hot in here with the blinds down.
Sarah: Would you say so?
Richard: Perhaps not. Perhaps it’s just that you feel hotter.
Sarah: Yes. That’s probably it. (p.152)

Pinter has brought conflicted dialogues forward and made it difficult for the readers to easily understand the deep meaning of them. There is a struggle between respectability and disrespectability. At the beginning, Richard looked at Sarah’s relationship with the lover apathetically. He shows respect in appearance, but when Sarah talks about cold supper and sets it forth – It’s a duty of housewife to make the dinner ready – it turns into an excuse for him to rage against Sarah and expresses his opposing feeling by asking a new question:

Richard: Does it ever occur to you that while you are spending the afternoon being unfaithful to me, I’m sitting at a desk going through balance sheets and graphs? (p.153)

This question is brought forward by Richard to probate Sarah and acquit himself of any sin. Sarah is convicted without trial. Their dialogues turn into a fantastic comedy when they attempt to bind their relationship and share a common feeling *at particular moments*.

Richard: Mmmn. But, in fact, I’m not completely forgotten?
Sarah: Not by no means.
Richard: That’s rather touching, I must admit. (p.154)

In addition, Sarah is the manifestation of women in 1960s “who found themselves faced with new challenges, especially the seeming national desire to return to prewar patriarchy; “put women on a pedestal but also in a cage *had returned* (Guerin. et al, 2011, p.255). If a woman was in trouble in the 1960s, she knew that “something must be wrong with her marriage or with herself” (Friedan, 1963, p.19).

The next clash between Sarah and Richard was over Richard’s relationship with a whore. This argument which is a head-on clash of the play brings forth a circumstance which is very complex. Richard insists on denying that he has got a mistress and instead he says that he is in a relationship with a whore, a prostitute, “a common slut”. A prostitute has the advantage, not only that she is available at a moment’s notice, but that having no life outside her profession, she can remain hidden without difficulty; and the man who has been with her can return to his wife, his family and his church with unimpaired dignity (Russell, p.55). By having a relationship with a whore, Richard will safeguard the foundation of family and his own credit, honor. He is free from any obligation and he has a whore who is easily in his access and whom he can hide.

Pinter challenges both religion and marriage in this play which are very connected to each other. Here is a conflict which may be stated in general form to be between marital ethics or moralities and sexual desire (Pinter, 1992):

Richard: But I haven’t got a mistress. I ‘m very well acquainted with a whore, but I haven’t got a mistress. There is a world of difference.

Sarah: A whore?

Richard: Yes. Just a common or garden slut. Not worth talking about. Handy between trains, nothing more. (p.155)

Any shame involved in going to prostitutes is subordinated to another important norm, male-dominated society, namely having many different sexual experiences (Mansson, p.2). Associating with prostitutes, his reaction of his state of mind upon marriage may be extraordinarily unfortunate, takes the form of assimilating marriage to prostitution (Russell, p.56).

Concerning the time when this play is written, patriarchy has returned and Richard is a prototype of patriarchal society – he is an old-fashioned man (husband). He cares for grace and elegance in women and treats his wife with an exaggerated respect in opposition to his real feeling. The play is somehow the voice of women and fights for women liberation – sexual liberation of women – though it shows that the woman is apparently the only guilty person. The image of sex for Richard is like a consumer product which he can buy or wish to buy, but to Sarah sex is mingled with love. Richard responds to his bodily needs and forgets about his spiritual needs. He values sex over love and separates them from each other. In fact, sexual desire and love are against each other for Richard. According to Fulton J. Sheen (1996):

As thinking fades, unrestrained desires come to the fore. Since physical and erotic desires are among the easiest to dwell upon, because they require no effort and because they are powerfully aided by bodily passion, sex begins to be all important. It is by no historical accident that an age of anti-intellectualism and irrationalism is an age of carnal license. (p.n)

In contrast, Sarah is trapped in a cage, which is called marriage, and seeks out love at the same time. Sarah is a wife who tries not to forget her own personality. To her, love doesn’t mean surrendering to a master. She needs man’s body with deep feeling of love. She finds it in the lover who is named Max and Richard plays its role. She fights against “being an inessential creature”; A woman whom Simone de Beauvoir (1953) describes in such a way in *The Second Sex*:

She chooses to desire her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her liberty; she will try to rise above her situation as an inessential object by fully accepting it, through her flesh, her feelings, her behavior, she will enthrone him as supreme value and reality: She will humble herself to nothingness before him. (p.609).

This biased attitude is deliberately portrayed in the chosen names and the characters’ appearances. It is already known that Sarah’s imaginary lover is named Max and the role is played by Richard. Max talks gently. He is so kind, appreciative, mature and thoughtful even though he wears “A suede jacket and no tie” (p.163). His appearance and the clothes he wears are emphasized and compared with those for Richard. Pinter would like to direct our attention to Max who is not placed in the same class as Sarah and is not a fitting marriage partner for her, compared to Richard.

Richard and Sarah reflect a middle-class family and they seem to be tired of their staid life. At the first glance, they just play roles to amuse each other. Richard looks for extra pleasure out of his marriage that would be fine if it is kept hidden, which is commonly accepted by societies. He sees Sarah as a whore though he says that he cares for elegance, grace and wit in women. Richard talks about Sarah’s relationship as an illegitimate one. There is no doubt that Richard is happy with Sarah when he walks with her in public. It seems that their marriage was a marriage of respect and pride, an arranged marriage, “A society of blind with its king who cannot bear to see and its queen who is inevitably wife and whore”. (Anonymous, 1969, p.102)

Simone de Beauvoir (1949), in her *the second sex*, asserted that marriage in reality suppress women’s erotic life and leads to their sexual frustration (de Beauvoir, p.514). Richard believes that there is dignity in his marriage but what about Sarah! Richard has a sex relation with a whore and doesn’t understand deep feelings. Richard and Sarah play to amuse each other but why Richard sees Sarah as a prostitute or a whore? To reach orgasm! Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1798), in her 1792

Vindication of the Rights of Women, criticized marriage as commonly no more than — “legal prostitution” [i.e., from actual prostitution or marrying in order to have economic security] (Brake, 2012, p.31). Richard thinks about Sarah when he has sex with a whore and sees her in that whore to increase his sexual taste and for titillation. In response to his ambivalent behavior, Sarah firmly says that she is not jealous of his whore because she sees no value. A deeper understanding of Sarah’s behavior is her total indifference to the time Richard spends with a whore and believes that it’s not rich and valuable so why should she be jealous of her? On the contrary, Richard thinks about Sarah’s afternoons and Sarah’s relationship as something valueless and boring especially about the lover who is bored of this. Richard is jealous and of course free in his relationship with a whore. He openly talks about his whore. In contrast, Sarah has to keep her lover at home and also her relationship with lovers hidden. Richard is fine with the boundaries of his marriage but Sarah feels that she is bound by marriage and to reform it she needs to do something. She changes the situation into fantasy and thinking about role-taking and playing.

To return to what was discussed before, when Sarah says she is happy and laughs with his lover, Richard is worried about the neighbors and if they could understand them (Sarah and her lover). Richard thinks about the bonds of marriage. He is afraid of gossip and whatever others may say. He wants Sarah to keep her relationship hidden. They live for others and hide their internal desires. Richard wants his wife to be secluded and to be only a housewife. But the lover who is named Max is very kind, so appreciative, mature and thoughtful. Sarah’s attempt to make Richard play the role of the lover, Max, is fruitless.

Now the collision is between Richard and Max. Richard firmly says that he is in a relationship with a whore and it doesn’t make any sense. On the other hand, Max confesses that he has got a full –time mistress:

Sarah: But your wife ... knows. Doesn't she? You've told her ... all about us. She's known all the time.

Max: No, she doesn't know. She thinks I know a whore, that's all. Some spare-time whore, that's all. That's what she thinks.

Sarah: Yes, but be sensible ... my love ... she doesn't mind, does she?

Max: She'd mind if she knew the truth, wouldn't she?

Sarah: What truth? What are you talking about?

Max: She'd mind if she knew that, in fact ... I've got a full-time mistress, two or three times a week, a woman of grace, elegance, wit, imagination – (Pinter, pp.169-170)

What’s more, the names Richard and Max are in conflict with each other. It seems that Pinter deliberately used these names, a clever use of names. The name Richard was formerly given to an unidentified fictitious defendant in criminal proceedings (*OED*). On the contrary, Max means greatest. It was called the stimulant of a ‘flash of lightning’, a ‘go of rum’, and a ‘glass of Max’- for so a

dream of neat sprit was called (*OED*). Hence Richard is a symbol of infidelity and dishonesty and Max is symbol of purity and honesty in men, a true lover.

But this question at last arises: is there a way to bring peace to these conflicts? Richard and Sarah are both tired of the traditional order of family roles. Meanwhile, Richard calls Sarah’s affair with her lover debauchery by which he means Sarah behaves immorally in sex. Richard talks about Sarah’s life as being morally bad and illegitimate, out of law, out of marriage. At the end of the play, Richard sees Sarah as a wife and asks her to bring food and cook for dinner but she doesn’t like this anymore. In a part of the play, Richard says that “The fact is this is my house” (Pinter, p.23); a middle-class society in which the husband earns money and he is who provides her with things. Richard thinks about his own position and scandals maybe around them. He has always appreciated Sarah but never loved her. He is not thoughtful and doesn’t understand Sarah well; “understanding is so rare, so dear” (Pinter, p.178), by this sentence Sarah means something deep and different. It is clear that Richard is ready to come back to the routine of their life but Sarah insists on behaving and acting against it.

CONCLUSION

Although the reader’s whole attention was enthralled by Sarah’s new gender role in *The Lover* and her attempts to escape from the obliged situation imposed by bourgeois predetermined standards, we planned to concentrate on the male character of the story who caused this challengingly weird condition. Richard as a husband expects Sarah to be a dual-purpose woman. On one hand, he cares for wit and respect in Sarah’s personality, admires her and feels proud to walk with her as her wife. On the other hand, he sees her as a whore, a functionary who pleases him well. He has an ambivalent attitude toward Sarah. In fact, Richard’s feelings are in conflict with each other and this conflict of interests muddles the gender balance in their married life. By using the benevolence of playing the role of a whore, Pinter’s female character defines a new gender attitude for the middle-class housewives and subsequently musters her courage to speak of her true feelings more openly. Sarah fights for her equal power and right even though the words are still hidden and ambiguous, what Pinter deliberately illustrates. Harold Pinter provides the readers with the issues of women, marriage and sexual politics. By ensconcing herself in the role of a whore, Sarah makes readers contemplate marriage and their sexual desire differently. Dismantling the existing gender roles, *the lover’s* female character criticizes the given standards of the society and breaks down the unfair restraint imposed on middle-class married women.

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