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Pinter's Feminine Talk against Masculine Vulgarity in *the Homecoming*: A Stylistic Analysis

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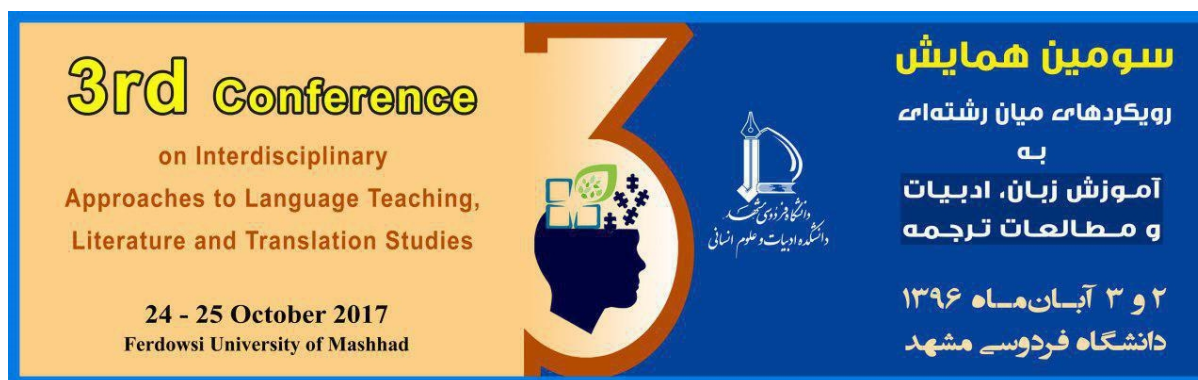
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Abstract:

This paper aims at exposing unjust power relations prevalent amongst the personages in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1964) considering discursive arrays of the text. Since the study revolves principally around textual clues, it focuses on some excerpts derived from the play. Power relations are scrutinized on two planes, i.e., the ones among the male personae regarding issues of masculinity and those present between the sole female character and other male personages in terms of male domination over femininity. It is strived to, firstly, implement the percept of Grice's maxims to demonstrate how individual characters flout the maxims and, hence, what the possible implications might be concerning power questions. Afterwards, the researcher endeavors to apply politeness principles, explored by Brown and Levinson, so as to reveal the ways in which Pinter unveils men's vulgar mainstream attitude toward women in patriarchal communities, as shown in the talk of male personae in the all-male tribe of the play. Ultimately, Mick Short's notions of turn-taking and topic shift have been taken into consideration to divulge in what manner personages undermine each other's superiority through interruptions, topic control, and turn length. It is anticipated that the analysis might disclose how Pinter has purposely concocted an intricate pattern of dramatic dialogues to make the audience aware of the unequal power dynamics rampant in patriarchal societies. The findings may illustrate how Pinter adroitly depicts an exemplary female character that might rise from anonymity to the pinnacle of domination over male personae.

Keywords: discourse, power, stylistics, masculinity, patriarch



1. Introduction:

The methodological framework of this paper focuses on the stylistic analysis of some excerpts of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1964) to show unequal power relations among the characters concerning discursive patterns. The issue of power relations is explored on two levels: first, power dynamics among male characters and their efforts to assert their masculinity in their interactions with other male characters; then, the struggles between the present female personage in the play and some of the male personae to attain domination over others.

Notwithstanding the numerous studies focusing specifically on Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1964), there might still be a gap regarding unequal power dynamics between male/female personae in Pinter's dramatic language. Hence, it is seminal to pinpoint the discursive stratagems Pinter manipulates to mirror the status quo of his society respecting femininity in masculine environments.

Consequently, the questions with which the researcher is engaged revolve around the issue of domination relations among the characters of Pinter's play in question. The researcher endeavors to reveal how Pinter weaves the threads of dramatic dialogue to demonstrate power dynamics and divulge which parties seemingly win this dialogic duel.

2. Background:

Cooper, in *Exploring the Language of Drama* (2002), argues that Paul Grice believes verbal exchanges are co-operative ventures and that the interlocutors have purposes for interactions; furthermore, he adds if the conversants co-operate, these purposes might be fulfilled. According to his Co-operative Principle, conversers have to suit their speech contributions to their purpose, to the circumstances, and to the direction of the conversational contribution. Moreover, he observes that participants in a conversation sometimes fail to follow these maxims purposefully for a multitude of reasons, for instance saying something obliquely, that is, conveying something by implicature. In other words, conversers flout Grice's maxims to encourage their interlocutors to infer what they implicate. These maxims include: quantity maxim, the contribution has to be informative accordingly; quality maxim, not stating falsities or what that requires more sufficient evidence; relation maxim, the converser has to be relevant; manner maxim, obscurity and ambiguity are to be avoided and the speaker is required to be brief and orderly (Culpeper, Short, & Verdonk, 2002, pp. 56, 57).

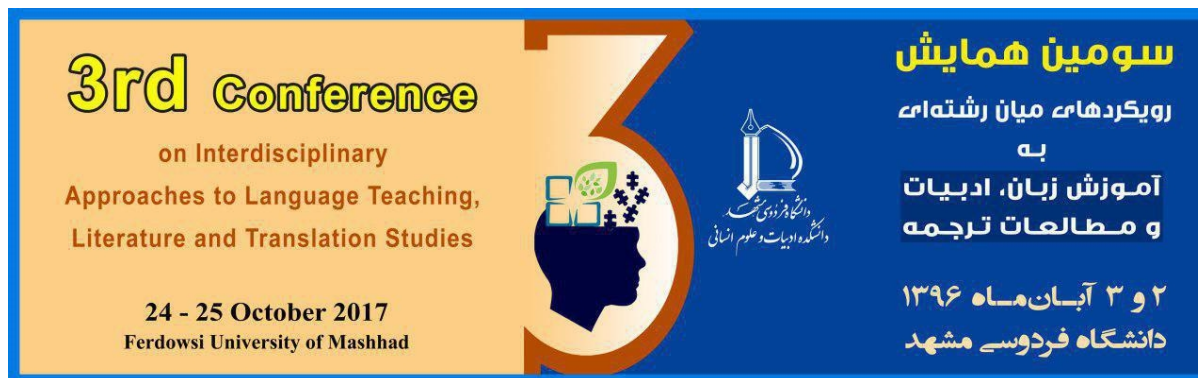
Brown and Levinson, as stated in *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose* (1996), claim that an individual's face, his self-image as exposed to the public, consists of negative and positive dimensions. To save the negative face, speakers want their actions not to be impeded by others. On the other hand, according to positive face, conversers wish that their needs and actions be regarded as favorable by other interlocutors. Thus, it follows that there must be some actions that might threaten our positive/negative face; Brown and Levinson have called these activities Face Threatening Acts, abbreviated as FTAs. Accordingly, if one desires to be polite toward others, he has to decrease the bulk and number of his FTAs or avoid them as much as possible. Otherwise, he has to behave in such a way so as to mitigate the force of the threat. In addition, they regard impoliteness as an escalation in the bulk and frequency of FTAs or burdening them upon the interlocutor without mitigating the force of the threat (Short, 1996, pp. 213, 214).

Mick Short (1996) posits that once a speech act occurs in a conversation we as listeners/audience expect another speech act to follow by another interlocutor. Normally, an answer is to follow a question, an acceptance an offer, and the performance of an order might naturally follow an order. Therefore, it follows that transgressions from these turn-taking patterns might have explicit or implicit connotations in a conversational exchange, such as the dramatic dialogues in a play. Short further contends that deviations from turn-taking conventions might also be a manifestation of powerful/powerless conversers. Predominantly, in conversational exchanges, dominant participants are conversation initiators, they claim most of the turns, have control over the topic, own the turns that are the longest, impede on other speakers, and more often than not decide who is going to contribute to the conversation next. In other words, the powerful interlocutor dominates the conversation on various levels (Short, 1996, pp. 205-207).

A number of studies have been performed on Pinter's plays in general and *The Homecoming* (1964) in specific. Some emphasize their linguistic features, since Pinter is reputable for his plays on dialogue, and others accented gender roles and femininity.

Sastre (1994) believes that Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1964) revolves around gender roles and men/women's desire in the society in terms of social roles (Sastre, 1994, p. 12). Sastre further argues that Ruth struggles against three forms of otherness, that is, class, family, and, above all, gender (Sastre, 1994, p. 13).

Ganz (1969) proposes that Ruth's character as a human in the family of the play is three-fold, i.e., she is simultaneously mother, wife, and prostitute. Accordingly, male



personae have conflicting reactions toward each fragment of her character when she, the only woman, intrudes upon their masculine household (Ganz, 1969, p. 181).

Saraci-terpollari (2013) contends that female characters are oftentimes absent from Pinter's plays; moreover, even if they are physically present, they might be mentally or emotionally absent among a band of male personae. Moreover, they are made to act against their conscious will and, therefore, female mentality may not be accounted for by male characters in his drama (Saraci-terpollari, 2013, pp. 679,680).

Roy (2007) asserts that Pinter's male and female characters fight in the battle of sexes on conventionally masculine grounds pursuing definite power (Roy, 2007, p. 337). He argues about uneasy power dynamics within Pinter's narrative.

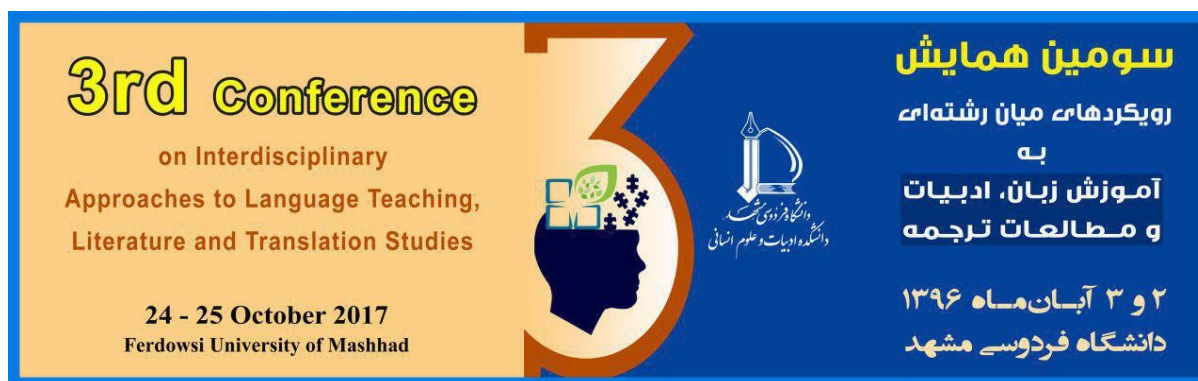
Rayner (1988) focuses on femininity and female body and claims that Ruth comes home to reclaim her rights as a woman in a masculine society. Furthermore, Rayner concentrates on the issue of absence and presence and argues that Ruth returns to fill the absence of a female entity and finally occupies the dominant chair in an all-male family (Rayner, 1988, pp. 492,493).

Lynch (2008) takes the role of discourse into consideration and maintains that Pinter's dialogues have discursive utility and concealed implications (Lynch, 2008, p. 104). Lynch, through the rest of his article, contemplates the role of discourse in Pinter's dialogues in Foucault's light.

Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari and Manavi (2014) also regard the issue of territorial conflict and that the occupants of these territories vie against each other through linguistic patterns. And that language break-down mirrors familial disputes (Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari and Manavi, 2014, p. 37).

Ramos (1998) argues that there is always a certain degree of misunderstanding in Pinter's plays. Characters that get conversationally entangled in everyday interactions within his plays convey a sense of breakdown in terms of communicational exchanges. Thus, this failure of communication becomes the chief means of interaction, that is, secondary layers of meaning (Ramos, 1998, p. 82).

Bowels (2009) considers the function of storytelling as a discursive technique in Pinter's play and reasons that characters utilize episodes of storytelling within a battle of territory waged and prolonged by all the members of the family that compete to take over discourse space (Bowels, 2009, p. 58)



3. Method:

The researcher strives to apply, firstly, the concept of Grice's maxims to reveal in what ways the characters flout them and what the subsequent implicatures of their failing to observe these maxims might be in terms of exerting their power over others. Secondly, it has been attempted to demonstrate how the notion of politeness discloses the general attitude of male characters towards women in a patriarchal society, such as the family in the play, as mirrored in their talk. Finally, the perceptions of topic control and turn-taking are two of the factors that determine which characters reign relatively dominantly over other personae in the play.

Taking the above-mentioned stylistic theories into account, a host of research questions present themselves; however, among them two seem to be almost relevant to the topic and play at issue. According to the stylistic tools designated for the analysis in this paper, how do the male characters try to exert their power over the female personage through opposing discourses? To what extent does this exercise of power attain desired results? Nevertheless, one might follow: How does the one present female character oppose this prevailing patriarchal power relation in the play through discourse and to what extent is she efficacious? This paper aims to answer these inquiries via implementing the following stylistic tools: Grice's maxims and the implications of their being flouted, Brown and Levinson's politeness principles, and Short's turn-taking patterns and the connotations of deviations from such norms.

4. Discussion:

Act one of the play begins in the main room downstairs where Lenny is approached by his father, Max, inquiring the whereabouts of scissors. Lenny pretends he does not notice him and provides no answer. Max reiterates himself repeatedly. Nonetheless, Lenny, absentmindedly, looks up and retorts using vulgar terms without addressing the issue. Max requires "What have you done with the scissors? ... Do you hear what I'm saying? I'm talking to you! Where's the scissors?" (Pinter, 1966, p. 7). Among Max's words there are three instances of pause showing he is eagerly awaiting an answer. According to Short (1996), in terms of turn-taking norms, the audience anticipates an inquiry to be ensued by an answer (Short, 1996, p. 205). Lenny's respond follows this norm, albeit delayed for an extended amount of time; nevertheless, his answer flouts Grice's relation maxim. Lenny says "Why don't you shut up, you draft prat?" (Pinter, 1966, p. 7). As Cooper (2002) posits, alluding to Grice, the addressee of a question has to be relevant when providing an answer if he wants the conversational exchange to be co-operative (Culpeper, Short, & Verdonk, 2002,

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p. 57). Not only is he not pertinent, but also he counters using coarse language. Therefore, the implication of a retarded answer that is simultaneously irrelevant and crude might be important; for it is possible that Lenny desires to undermine his father's virile.

Max, seeing his position of supremacy at risk, shifts the topic continually holding the floor for as long as possible. First he warns Lenny against his crude behavior, then changes the topic talking about an advertisement in the newspaper. Afterwards, he asks Lenny to give him a cigarette, yet his request is not followed by a proper answer, hence his status is again dwindled. Thereafter, he shifts the topic and starts talking about the old times when he was a powerful person by whom everyone in the area was intimidated, and that he could still overpower Lenny physically. Ultimately, he switches the topic again reminiscing about Lenny's mother in a sordid manner. As mentioned earlier, Short (1996) suggests that in a conversation the powerful speaker has a series of advantages over the powerless one, including the control over conversational topic, taking the floor the longest, and interrupting his interlocutors (Short, 1996, p. 206). Hence, it might be logical to claim that Max does his best to restore his denigrated position.

Nevertheless, Lenny simply interrupts Max and addresses him in a toxic way, saying "Plug it, will you, you stupid sod, I'm trying to read the paper" (Pinter, 1966, p. 9). In so doing, Lenny asserts his superior position by interrupting his father repeatedly. Additionally, he threatens Max's negative face by impeding his wish to continue holding the floor. Eventually, Lenny threatens his father's positive face through calling him names and damaging his status. Ergo, not only does he not mitigate his FTAs, but also he performs them in the most explicit manner. Short (1996), referring to Brown and Levinson, proposes that to be impolite one has to maximize the bulk and frequency of his FTAs, carry them out without reducing their force, and try to perform the FTAs *on record* (Short, 1996, p. 214). Both Lenny and Max exploit linguistic techniques to mar one another's dominion. Henceforth, this seesaw of power relation keeps vacillating as Max once again has a rather long turn after which Lenny shifts the topic unequivocally by saying "Dad, do you mind if I change the subject?" (Pinter, 1966, p. 10). Nonetheless, the audience is not to be deceived by his polite tone, since the uncensored sarcasm is revealed in the topic that Lenny initiates thereafter, where he disparages his father's ability to cook decent meals.

Regarding women, Max is impolite toward female characters, present or absent, throughout the course of the play. Culpeper (2002) refers to Brown and Levinson and suggests that positive face pertains to our desire of being approved of by others. He further argues that, to save one's positive face, individuals tend to need others to recognize their

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existence, endorse their opinions, or make manifest their reverence for the individual and what he might say. Moreover, he argues that impoliteness strategies refer to tactics that are fundamentally formulated to inflict offence on people and cause social disturbance (Culpeper, Short, & Verdonk, 2002, p. 84).

Max, when talking about women including Jessie and Ruth, uses vulgar terms and thus threatens women's positive face in general. When Max meets Ruth, he tells Teddy "Who asked you to bring tarts in here?" (Pinter, 1966, p. 41). Within the subsequent lines, he implements terms such as "Smelly scrubber", "pox-ridden slut", "bitch", "filthy scrubber", "whore", and "disease", to refer to women in general, and to Ruth and Jessie, his daughter-in-law and his wife respectively, in particular. Thus, Max's FTAs toward women imply that he endeavors to threaten women's status in society by denigrating their face through linguistic strategies.

Roughly about the middle of the play Ruth and Lenny, after meeting each other for the first time, engage in a conversation that is fragmented in terms of topic. In the middle of their verbal exchange, Lenny, unexpectedly, asks Ruth whether it is ok if he holds her hand. Then, Ruth asks for a reason and he says "I'll tell you why" (Pinter, 1966, p. 30); however, he holds the floor recounting a long story where he is accosted by a lady that makes an indecent proposal and he turns it down, since the woman was diseased. Finally, he says that he could have killed that woman, but he did not, for it was not worth it. This long tale of his masculine domination over another lady might be relevant, for he implies the idea that if he demands that she let him hold her hand, she has to consent.

Regarding Grice's maxims, Lenny is flouting three maxims: quantity, relation, and manner. He fails to observe quality maxim for his contribution is undesirably extensively explanatory. He flouts the relation maxim since his respond is irrelevant to Ruth's question. Finally, his ambiguous irrelevant answer recounting unnecessary details demonstrates his non-observance of manner maxim. Lenny's non-observance of the maxims is significant for he intends to impose his sovereignty upon Ruth. He does so by unnecessarily prolonging his conversational turns relating a threatening, seemingly irrelevant, story, where he almost brutally murders a woman.

Ruth, after hearing Lenny's interminable account of battering a woman, appears as utterly unaffected by its force and simply asks "How did you know she was diseased?" (Pinter, 1966, p. 31), i.e., she focuses on a very inconsequential detail in the account to show her indifference. Noticing Ruth's impassivity, Lenny changes the topic again and, when

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confronted with another simple question posed by Ruth that naturally demands a brief straightforward respond, commences yet another lengthy tale where he beats up an old lady solely because she made an unreasonable demand on him.

It follows that Lenny strives to assert his masculine superiority on Ruth by changing the conversational topic repeatedly, holding the most extended turns redundantly, and giving impertinent replies in addition to flouting a number of other maxims. Furthermore, he threatens Ruth's negative face by persistently telling her to do what seems unfavorable to Ruth. For instance, Lenny insists on taking a glass of water away from Ruth when she says "I haven't quite finished" (Pinter, 1966, p. 33), yet he keeps asking and ultimately utters "I'll take it then" (Pinter, 1966, p. 34). Manifestly, Lenny does not attempt to mitigate his FTAs, on the contrary he makes his blunt requests without any redress to be downright impolite and superior to Ruth.

The climax takes place when Ruth relinquishes supposed passivity and threatens Lenny's negative face. In the glass of water dispute, Ruth unexpectedly demands "Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass" (Pinter, 1966, p. 34), staggered, Lenny stands still. She follows "Sit on my lap. Take a long cool sip" (Pinter, 1966, p. 34); still, she seems discontented and ends her turn saying boldly "put your head back and open your mouth" (Pinter, 1966, p. 34). Ruth's daring FTAs strike the audience as influential since Lenny seems to be passively motionless and silent. Then, Lenny, baffled, demands "What are you doing, making some kind of proposal?" (Pinter, 1966, p. 34). She exacerbates the situation to Lenny's disadvantage when, instead of replying to Lenny's question, she smiles at him triumphantly saying "Oh, I was Thirsty" (Pinter, 1966, p. 35), which is essentially irrelevant to his query. When Lenny repeats the question, she goes upstairs without answering.

Subsequently, Ruth subverts Lenny's ascendancy by threatening his negative face, flouting relevance maxim, and violating turn-taking conventions by refusing to provide an answer. Ruth destabilizes the situation by defying the most powerful personage in the story using the same linguistic techniques utilized by all the epitomes of masculinity in Pinter's play.

Towards the end of the play, Lenny and Max decide to use Ruth's presence as a professional prostitute. She agrees to the new arrangement provided that her demands are met. She stipulates conditions many of which come across as undesired on Lenny's part; however, he finally approves of almost all of her requests submissively. Her first stipulation, "I would want at least three rooms and a bathroom" (Pinter, 1966, p. 76), is treated as an

imposing request by Lenny since he patently retorts “You wouldn’t need three rooms and a bathroom” (Pinter, 1966, p. 77). Ruth reiterates her request and is faced with Lenny’s rejection. Finally, she persistently proclaims “No. Two wouldn’t be enough. ...” (Pinter, 1966, p. 77), and Lenny, exhausted by her demanding nature, agrees to her terms. It is of paramount importance to note that this is the second one-to-one encounter between Lenny, the most masculine character, and Ruth, the only present female character, supposedly dominated by the male personae. Regardless, Ruth threatens Lenny’s negative face virtually ten times, via her demands that impede his desire to disagree, and whenever her requests are turned down she augments the bulk and frequency of her FTAs without extenuation.

Therefore, Ruth might initially come across as a woman who is naturally subjugated in a virile all-male family; notwithstanding, regarding her discursive behavior, she nullifies their macho treatment of her through her verbal counters.

5. Conclusion:

It became almost clear that virtually all the personae of the play engage in various conversational exchanges whereby they strive to subvert their interlocutor’s dominion asserting their own supremacy over other characters through linguistic tactics. Supposedly, the male characters have taken their superiority over the female personae for granted and, hence, are simply struggling to reign over other men in the household. Nonetheless, upon the entrance of the female character, Ruth, men’s sovereignty is being diminished piecemeal.

Regarding the discursive patterns fabricated throughout the play, one might observe that the events are upset in favor of Ruth. Although Ruth initially manages to outwit others, particularly Lenny, it appears that she is not yet fully prepared to reclaim her true rights as a woman that has been subdued. Instead, she unwisely becomes an accomplice in her commodification as a sexual object and in return she demands material possession of a flat. In lieu of requiring proper respect and rights as a human being equal to men, she demands “I’d want a dressing-room, a rest-room, and a bedroom” (Pinter, 1966, p. 77).

Therefore, Pinter might be hinting at the fact that women might be intelligent enough to compensate verbally for their supposed physical weakness and plot against men to reclaim their rights. However, their psyche is so profoundly formed by the prevalent discursive patterns of masculine societies that they are estranged from their true interests as a citizen.

As for the future studies, one might focus on the ideological practices that lead men to see themselves as essentially superior and women as inferior and then shed light on the ways

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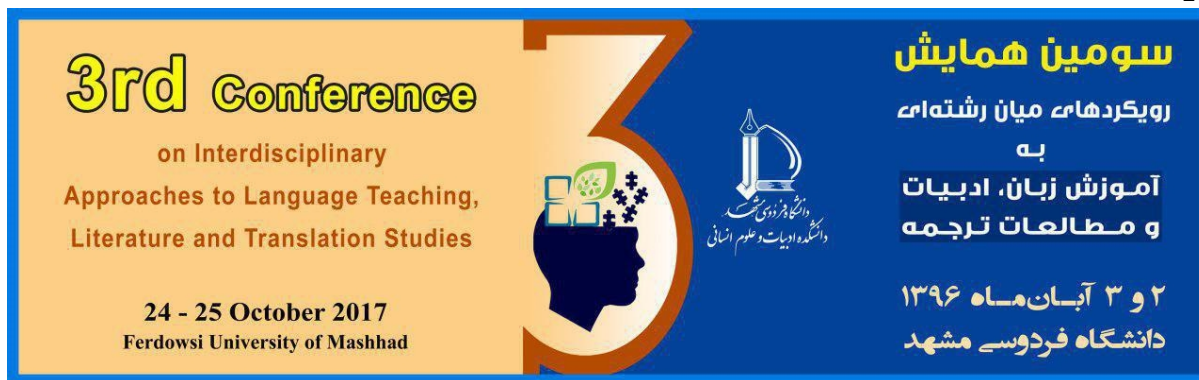
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in which these tendencies are rendered as a natural phenomenon that is ultimately internalized by men and women. Moreover, one can investigate the psychological undercurrents in operation, causing major characters to behave the way they do; that is, the unconscious motives and desires that might provoke a son, Lenny, to treat his father, Max, downright devoid of reverence and defy his status as a respectable member of the family.

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