

## **HAROLD PINTER: FROM POETICS TO POLITICS**

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### **Abstract**

*Harold Pinter was given the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005 for his contributions to British and contemporary drama. Pinter has been a theatrical institution for half a century, he has revolutionised his theatre by being a conscientious objector in public and a political activist since the 1980s. He has explored different genres including prose and poetry, plays for stage, radio and screen. His crossover from one medium to another, his deliberate decision to write for more than one medium, has given him the opportunity to reach the potential mass audience. He has shocked bewildered, disappointed, and astonished audiences and critics. He swiftly became accepted as Britain's premier dramatist. This paper traces the evolution that Pinter has gone through from the early 1950s until the 2000s. Additionally, the paper identifies Harold Pinter's 'Pinteresque' style – a term which enters English Language and Literature after him and also exemplify and reason Pinter's change in his style from poetical to political.*

**Key Words:** Harold Pinter, British Theatre, Political Theatre, Language

### **Özet**

*İngiliz ve Dünya Tiyatrosuna katkılarından dolayı 2005 yılında Harold Pinter'a Nobel Edebiyat ödülü verilmiştir. Pinter yarım asırdır tiyatroya hizmet etmektedir, 1980lerden günümüze kadar, tiyatro kimliğini politik kimliğiyle zenginleştirmiştir. Yarım asırlık dönemde, düzyazı, şiir, tiyatro oyunu, radyo oyunu ve film senaryosu gibi farklı türlerde eserler üretmiştir. Edebiyat türleri arasındaki geçişleri ve değişimleri O'nun her zaman daha fazla izleyici kitlesine ulaşmasına imkân vermiştir. Edebiyat eleştirmenlerini ve izleyicileri şaşırtmış, büyülemiş, kızdırmış hatta hayal kırıklığına uğratmıştır. Kısa zamanda İngiliz Tiyatrosunun en önde gelen yazarı olmuştur. Bu çalışma, 1950-2000 yılları arasında geçen bir üretkenliğin evrimini ve 'Pinteresque' kavramını İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatına kazandıran Harold Pinter'in yazarlık hayatında şiirsel ve gizemli başlayan üslubunun giderek artan politik söylemlerinin örneklerini ve nedenlerini izleyecektir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Harold Pinter, İngiliz Tiyatrosu, Politik Tiyatro, Dil

For Pinter 'writing is discovery and journey',<sup>1</sup> a journey which led him to become a dissident thinker. Each decade has confirmed a continuing movement in his work and 1970 was crucial because of a transformation.<sup>2</sup> There was a move from East London (in many of his pre-1970 plays) to North London (his post-1970 plays), from menace to mannerism. The significance of his move from the plays' original working-class milieu towards a world of intellectual and professional middle-class culture made him a cultural icon in the 1970s. As his political development advanced in the 1980s and 1990s, his status as world-renowned playwright, in a theatre that was increasingly looking towards the political arena, was even clearer and he became a 'political' icon, a theorist, and a critic of the social order. For Pinter 'Theatre is essentially exploratory. [...] theatre has always been a critical act'.<sup>3</sup> He had been a true voyager, discovering maps as he went along.

In 1975, Howard Brenton dreamed 'of a play acting like a bush-fire, smouldering into public consciousness. Or - like hammering on the pipes being heard all through a tenement.' Brenton's generation - David Edgar, Edward Bond, David Hare - founded the fringe theatre whose dream was to create an 'alternative culture' as resulting from feeling the public nature of the theatre; however, Brenton regretted that the fringe had failed, and no playwright of his generation had 'written well enough yet', had 'actually got into public, actually touched life outside theatre'.<sup>4</sup> A few years later Pinter's getting into public was actually a dream come true for Brenton and his generation. As early as 1948, Pinter knew that he 'wanted to get out in the world'.<sup>5</sup> And more recently, Pinter was the only person who broadcast/televised an anti-war programme for BBC2 on the calamity in the Balkans for which he held NATO responsible; additionally he delivered a speech on the same issue, 'The Nato Action in Serbia'.<sup>6</sup> Not only Brenton, but John Arden, too, was looking for a playwright who would write the 'serious social play'; and in the early 1960s he found Pinter's agenda frustratingly hard to define. Arden thought that in *The Caretaker*,

the elder brother's account of his brain-operation is highly detailed and circumstantial. But is it true? If it is true, why isn't Mr Pinter writing that serious social play to denounce the cruelty prevalent in mental hospitals?

<sup>1</sup> Pinter at Cambridge Conference. A British Council Conference, held in Cambridge on 13 July 1999.

<sup>2</sup> In 1970 Pinter wrote *Old Times*, he won Hamburg Shakespeare Prize, an Honour Degree Litt from the University of Reading, he wrote *No Man's Land* in 1974 (Peter Hall found himself depressed by the critics' inability to recognise the masterly way Pinter's talent was developing. He could not believe that *No Man's Land* was difficult. See *Peter Hall's Diaries*, p. 161).

<sup>3</sup> Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), September 1993, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Howard Brenton interviewed by Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler, 'Petrol Bombs Through the Proscenium Arch', *Theatre Quarterly*, 5(1975), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Gussow, *Conversations*, September 1993, p. 142.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Pinter, 'The Nato Action in Serbia', this speech was delivered to the Confederation of Analytical Psychologists, London, 25 June 1999.

And if it isn't true, why does it take the crucial place in the text - the climax of Act Two?<sup>7</sup>

Eventually in his later stage and screen scripts Pinter did indeed clearly criticise current widespread persecution in the institutions of the state: from hospitals (*Hothouse*)<sup>8</sup> to prisons (*One for the Road*, *Mountain Language*). Pinter's plays reached beyond the world of the theatre and became part of the starkly politicised 1980s social and cultural scene. Above all, his work established a 'theory of power' and articulated the use/abuse of the political power of language. Pinter's work has obviously met the needs of the contemporary theatre.

Pinter's established persona of the 1950s and 1960s started to become unstable in the 1970s. At that time a new theatrical charter was emerging in Britain of which perhaps Edward Bond was the symbol. While Tom Stoppard was entertaining the nation with his language games, the Royal Court fostered a wave of social realists and social critics as diverse as David Storey and Howard Barker. In 1978, Pinter's *Betrayal* was seen as a crisis: 'Yet the play is a definite departure for Pinter. Gone are the carefully formed innuendoes, the sinister ambiguities, the impending disasters'.<sup>9</sup> After this, his mature plays of the 1980 and 1990s received hostile criticism, especially when *One for the Road* in 1980 represented a greater break with his previous work. The critics failed to see that his plays represented his political involvement (both internationally and as an opponent of Thatcherism) and his interest in wider social issues.

Pinter concentrated heavily on cinema after *No Man's Land*; he experimented and surveyed different subjects and explored notions of self-consciousness. He looked at other people's works to enrich ways to reflect his main concerns and re-explore his own roots. But critics and academics marked this period as Pinter's end as a writer, a setback in his career: he was a second Stanley who had nothing to say. Nevertheless, films gave an overview that supported and reflected his political concerns. His film-scripts fitted in very well with what Pinter was trying to achieve, for films are more public work than plays. He insisted that the film adaptations were 'acts of the imagination on [his] part'.<sup>10</sup> The film work and the absence of a full-length play in the fifteen-year period between *Betrayal* and *Moonlight* were regarded as symptoms of 'writer's block'. In fact, however, this period was penetrating and acute; it was the period in which Pinter, the withdrawn artist of the 1960s and 1970s, revolutionised his privacy and remodelled his use of theatre into a more public activity; when Pinter the playwright became a critic of Western democracies, and when his new political works functioned as agents of history.

<sup>7</sup> John Arden, 'Pinter's "Realism"' (1960), in *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming: A Casebook*, ed. by Michael Scott, p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> written but discarded before *The Caretaker*, produced in 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Linda Ben-Zvi, 'Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*: The Patterns of Banality', *Modern Drama*, 23(1980-81), pp. 227-37 (p. 227).

<sup>10</sup> Gussow, *Conversations*, September 1993, p. 100.

Despite the assumptions of mainstream Pinter criticism, the period between *Betrayal* (1978) and *Moonlight* (1993) marked a revolution in Pinter's career. This was also the time when he transformed his image, which had been framed by the idea of the 'Pinteresque'. The 'Pinteresque' is often interpreted as pauses, enigmas and menace. The word, which implies the use of silences, vague dialogues, memory games and menacing outsiders, has passed into everyday language. Pinter does not approve of the image. He believes that 'Harold Pinter' sits on his back, and he is 'someone else's creation'.<sup>11</sup> Pinter has succeeded in dissolving that image with his political plays. Critics who could not fit Pinter's political plays into the 'Pinteresque' image dismissed them; they preferred to label this period as a core of 'writer's block' because of their own inability to accept Pinter's political arguments and because of their reluctance to see Pinter from outside the 'Pinteresque' image. And yet when Pinter seemed to abandon politics in *Moonlight* (1993), critics were back to influence their readers to join in a tired scepticism. Ghilardi-Santacatterina and Sierz argued that Pinter is 'a victim of his own image'.<sup>12</sup> Contrarily, he is both intuitive and intellectual, and more intentional than is generally recognised.

Critics wrote a great deal about Pinter's alleged creative constipation: 'Why Doesn't He Write More',<sup>13</sup> 'Plot there is none'.<sup>14</sup> He wrote fewer plays but instead he created several adaptations for the screen;<sup>15</sup> and it is wrong to dismiss this as a second-class activity. He was participating actively in questions of human rights, censorship, and the United States' foreign policy in Central America. During that time, *Betrayal* (1978) and *One for the Road* (1984) were his only full-length plays.

Pinter said in an interview in 1996 that 'Theatre is about relish, passion, engagement. It also leads to adventure. It's not a careful activity, it's a dangerous activity'.<sup>16</sup> In the world of public events in the 1980s, Pinter became a political activist both nationally and internationally with a clear set of public opinions defined by his active involvement with International PEN, Charter 88, Amnesty International, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Arts for Nicaragua, the 20<sup>th</sup> June Group and Index on Censorship. After decades of apparent non-commitment and coolness towards polemical drama, and at a time when the 1968 generation of radical dramatists was losing its energy and moving towards

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, December 1971, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Ghilardi-Santacatterina and Aleks Sierz, 'Pinter and the Pinteresque: An Author Trapped by his Own Image', in *Drama on Drama*, ed. by Nicole Boireau (Macmillan Press: London, 1997), pp. 108-20 (p. 112).

<sup>13</sup> Patricia Bosworth, 'Why Doesn't He Write More', *New York Times*, 27 October 1968, sec. V, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in John Bush Jones, 'Stasis as a Structure in Pinter's *No Man's Land*', *Modern Drama* 19(1976), pp. 291-304 (p. 296).

<sup>15</sup> Pinter's screen adaptations include *The Servant* (1963), *The Pumpkin Eater* (1963), *The Quiller Memorandum* (1966), *Accident* (1966), *The Go-Between* (1969), *The Proust Screenplay* (1972), *Langrishe, Go Down* (1970), *The Last Tycoon* (1976), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), *Victory* (1982), *Turtle Diary* (1985), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1987), *The Heat of the Day* (1988), *Reunion* (1989), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1990), *The Trial* (1990).

<sup>16</sup> Mireia Aragay, 'Writing, Politics, and *Ashes to Ashes*: An Interview with Harold Pinter', *Pinter Review*, Tampa, 1995-96, pp. 4-15 (p. 9). Reprinted in *Various Voices*, pp. 58-70.

disillusioned silence, Pinter quite unexpectedly opposed the general feeling that effective political theatre was an impossibility. Above all, he suggested that the language of political systems must be observed critically.<sup>17</sup> His forthright political plays were not concerned with utopian visions of revolution, however, but with depicting the ways power operates. The previously 'non-political' Pinter now openly admitted the importance of the social forces that govern our lives.<sup>18</sup> His creative work was 'about' tyranny abroad, but also about injustices at home and the ways Britain seemed to be changing morally.

During the 1970s, British Theatre was dominated by left-wing politics and class conflicts. At this time Pinter explored private perception and individual memory. In contrast to the political drama of the period, Pinter's memory plays were lyrical rather than intellectual and concerned with emotions rather than ideas. As Pinter said, 'The theatre is a large, energetic, public activity. Writing is, for me, a completely private activity, a poem or a play, no difference'.<sup>19</sup> However, in the late 1980s, when political theatre had virtually disappeared from the British stage, Pinter turned to politics; he transformed his 'completely private activity' into 'a large, energetic, public activity'. His concern was with the international and national politics of freedom and democratic citizenship.

Pinter's movement into political drama was not easy. *Other Places*, which he wrote in 1980, was followed by a three-year period in which he did not write a play; he said he was 'getting more and more imbedded in international issues'.<sup>20</sup> After *Other Places*, Pinter told Mel Gussow that he 'felt obliged to explore other territory':<sup>21</sup> the world of national/international public events; and at this stage he still thought this was inimical to dramatic experience. But, with *Precisely*, Pinter started to explore the 'other territory' and discover a new voice for himself and his theatre. It was performed at the Apollo Theatre, London, as part of an anti-nuclear gala in December 1983.

Pinter has charted the relationship between the individual and the collective and portrayed political and social repression in the contemporary world. He criticises the authoritarian state as an example of ideology's ability to mystify and abstract its own operations. His 'absurd', 'mysterious' dramas have characterised him as a true representative of this atrocious century of the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and Kosovo. His creative output blurs the line between actual and play. Especially in his overtly political plays of the 1980s, he fleshes out his objective/historical analysis with personal and poetic narratives of drama.

The different genres, and the miscellaneous writings for different media, prove Pinter's expertise in 'various voices'. His output explores the depth of the human

<sup>17</sup> See Gottlieb Vera, 'Pinter's Landscapes - or "It Never Happened"', an interview with Harold Pinter (London, 22 January 1998), in *Theatre in a Cool Climate* (Oxford: Amber Lane Press: 1999), pp. 13-26

<sup>18</sup> At the British Council Conference, Pinter admitted that he knew his early plays were political, but he actually lied that they were not.

<sup>19</sup> Pinter, 'Writing for the Theatre', p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Billington, *The Life*, p. 286.

<sup>21</sup> Gussow, *Conversations*, September 1993, p. 149.

condition in the space of the twentieth century; it is a set of sketches portraying 'Western Civilisation' in decline. He has perhaps become the only leading English playwright to imagine the world from the viewpoint of colonised peoples rather than from a Western perspective and has shown the power to understand and share the other's vision of the world. He is at one with the theorists of Post-colonial discourse. He has updated the term 'imperialism' to establish that it 'remains an active and vibrant force in the world today, through the vehicle of financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank; imperialism is in a position to dictate policy to smaller states which rely on their credit.'<sup>22</sup>

Discussing the reception of his new agenda, Pinter satirically talked in 1985 with his publisher Nicholas Hern about becoming 'an exhibitionist, self-important, pompous. [...] Before you know where you are you're having make-up put on, your eyelashes are being tinted'. Critics regarded Pinter's politically engaging plays as 'a revolutionary new direction - in Hern's summary 'a sudden crystallisation of his political sensibility' - and were generally baffled and hostile. However, Pinter pointed out that the critics had regarded his earlier work as 'rubbish' too - 'absurd rubbish'.<sup>23</sup> For example John McGrath had condemned Pinter for an indulgence in absurdity, mystery and enigma - 'the significant failure to say anything significant'.<sup>24</sup> But in a real sense, from the beginning, his texts had been defining an inescapable sense of pessimism and alienation in the contemporary world, and though the perspective had altered, the vision had not.

In 1999 Pinter's participation in a Cambridge Conference, organised by the British Council, made the fact clear once more that he had always been critical of the operations of the state machinery, and the ideological underpinnings of the authoritarian state as another example of ideology's ability to mystify/abstract its own operations. As he read and acted scenes from a selection of his plays, and especially when he delivered Stanley's line, 'They carved me up' with wholehearted malevolence, he deliberately stressed the political power of language. Pinter has continuously been a conscientious objector in the widest sense, even in his 'comedies of menace', the 'absurd' and 'mysterious' early work. His plays are constantly being generalised as filled with 'mystery'. But this was a conscious strategy, set out in his early novel, *The Dwarfs*, where Len says:

Mysteries are always new mysteries, I've decided that. So, you see, I am alive and not a storehouse of dead advice and formulas of how to live. And won't be. But I have to be silent, like the guilty. (*The Dwarfs*, p. 94).

<sup>22</sup> Pinter, 'Nato Action in Serbia'.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Hern, 'A Play and Its Politics', *One for the Road* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 7-23 (p. 19). (When Hern's employers Methuen were taken over by a multinational company, Pinter moved in protest to Faber).

<sup>24</sup> John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (Methuen: London, 1981), p. 84.

For many years, Pinter was determined not to fall into the trap of offering 'dead advice'. Increasingly, however, he became convinced that it was his duty to name 'the guilty'. Pinter broke his 'silence' with *One for the Road*; and the 'directness' of his political views was obvious from then on.

Despite the clear political statements, he was still concerned with time, memory, sexuality, loss, separation and solitude. However, the major difference in the political texts is the depiction of the *destruction* of memory and sexuality. While the earlier plays were about the opposite/gendered linguistic acts of the isolated man and woman, in the political plays individual freedom is suppressed by established authority.

Similarly, Pinter reaffirmed his role not only 'as an actor and entertainer' but also as 'a citizen of the world in which I live, [and I] insist upon taking responsibility...to actually find out what the truth is and what actually is happening,...to [investigate] the blanket of lies which unfortunately we are either too indifferent or too frightened to question.'<sup>25</sup>

Pinter's political statements, from the 1980s to the present day, focus on the nature of the language employed by politicians, and how language is manipulated by those seeking to justify acts of aggression within domestic or international conflicts. As such, his political work attempts to portray duplicity and untruthfulness in political manoeuvres through a specific concentration on the arrangement of language. Pinter combines his dramatic art with his analytic observations and commits himself to showing the middle classes what they will not or cannot see. Through public activism and art, Pinter has tried to seek out the truth – the 'abstracted realities and make it public. At the dawn of a new millennium Pinter urges a need for a politically curious, a politically questioning theatre-going society.

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<sup>25</sup> Lois Gordon, 'Harold Pinter in New York', in *Harold Pinter: A Casebook*, ed. by Lois Gordon (London: Grand Publishing, 1990), pp. 215-22 (pp. 218-19), originally published in *The Pinter Review* III (1989). (This program took place in New York, on 3 October 1989, and consisted of Pinter's reading and Gussow's interview, Lois Gordon was one of the participants).

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