

## Harold Pinter as a Poet: Compassion and Truth

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores a selection from Harold Pinter's poetic output (1948 and 2007) and traces the evolution in his poetic voice in three major periods: Early Poetry, Irish Period and Anti-war Poetry. Pinter's artistic output has been labelled mostly as absurd, mysterious, and enigmatic but in reality he has been exploring existential alienation in an oppressive world. In his early poetry he deals with a mental landscape which is still in the process of being formed through powerful and original imagination. Ireland and Yeats had an insightful effect on his literary sensibility and certainly changed his poetry. The third period includes anti-war poetry which Pinter uses as a platform to speak out against wars as Pinter revolutionised his privacy and remodelled his art into a more public activity.

**Key Words:** *Harold Pinter, poetry, Ireland, anti-war poems*

### Şair Olarak Harold Pinter: Şefkat Ve Hakikat

### ÖZET

Bu çalışma Pinter'ın 1948-2007 yılları arasında yazdığı şiirlerinden bazılarını ilk dönem şiirleri, İrlanda şiirleri ve savaş karşıtı şiirleri başlıkları altında inceleyerek Pinter'ın şair olarak değişimini keşfeder. Yazarın edebi eserleri çoğunlukla 'absürd', 'gizemli' ve 'bilinmez' olarak yorumlanır, halbuki Pinter eserlerinde acımasız bir dünyada bireyin varolma çabalarını anlatır. İlk dönem şiirlerinde genç edebiyatçı, yeni şekillenen düşüncelerini, hayat görüşünü güçlü ve orjinal bir hayal gücü ile anlatır. İrlanda ve Yeats Pinter'ın edebi duyarlılığında, özellikle şiirlerinde çok etkili olmuştur. Çalışmanın 3. bölümü Pinter'ın savaş karşıtı şiirlerini inceler. Bu dönemde Pinter, ilk dönem eserlerindeki içine kapanık sanatçı rolünün aksine sanatını toplumun gerçeklerini yansıtmak için kullanan bir edebiyatçı olarak sanatsal rolünü yenilemiştir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** *Harold Pinter, şiir, İrlanda, savaş karşıtı şiirler*

### Introduction

British playwright and 2005 Nobel Literature Prize Winner Harold Pinter died on the Christmas Day, 2008, perhaps marking an end of an era – 1950s 'Angry Young Men'. Though he is best known for theatrical work, actually he was a poet before a playwright. On 28 February 2005, in an interview with Mark Lawson on the BBC Radio 4 programme Front Row, Pinter announced publicly that he would stop writing plays to dedicate himself to his political activism and writing poetry. In a career covering five decades, he has produced such masterpieces as *The Homecoming*, *Betrayal*,

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*The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*. As he had announced, he remained committed to writing and publishing poetry until his last days.

Writing and active promotion of poetry have always been a form of release for Pinter.<sup>1</sup> For the same reason he co-edited two anthologies -100 Poems by 100 Poets and 99 Poems in Translation - formally joined the board in 1987 and privately financed twenty volumes of poetry, as well as paying for sundry launch parties.<sup>2</sup> Having been honoured with the Europe Theatre prize in Turin in 2006, Pinter speaks to Michael Billington about the poetry form which he has been writing since his youth<sup>3</sup>. Pinter has indeed increasingly turned to poetry as his favored genre, publishing a collection, entitled *War*, in 2003 which expresses his passionate opposition to the Iraq conflict. *War*, winner of the Wilfred Owen Award holds special weight for Pinter as it is given for both the poetic and political qualities of an author's work. Equally important, he was awarded the Legion d'Honneur, France highest honour, by the French Prime Minister, Dominic de Villepin. The Prime Minister praised Pinter's poem *American Football*: 'With its violence and its cruelty, it is for me one of the most accurate images of war, one of the most telling metaphors of the temptation of imperialism and violence'.<sup>4</sup>

His poetry shows parallelism with his plays in a sense that Pinter has blurred the distinction between the fictional and the real world. His concerns about the social repressions in the contemporary world have documented itself in his mature poetry and prose in which he has charted the relationship between the individual and the collective.

### Early Poetry

Pinter's plays are famous for their menacing atmosphere,<sup>5</sup> and this is clear in the poems, too. *The Midget* begins with the ringing airs; a night which could have been entertaining with the clown's funny outlook and amusing shows progresses into a vision of doomed and terror-ridden image with its voyagers standing stiff, 'Deathsure, stiff and confined'<sup>6</sup>. The feeling of terror intensifies with a sense of helplessness which is reminiscent of the Joycean paralysis in *Dubliners*. Evidently, *Message* bears unexpected vilonce and threat out of an ordinary everyday situation. The mother passes her daughter a message about Fred's phone call to say that he cannot make tonight. The mundane state of affairs between a mother and a daughter continues with mother's explosive words: 'Go on the town, burn someone to death'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>1</sup> Having studied at both Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and the Central School of Speech and Drama, Pinter is one of the few professionally-trained voices in the Poetry Archive.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.haroldpinter.org/poetry>

<sup>3</sup> Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2006, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Crown, 'Harold Pinter receives top French honour', *Guardian Unlimited* 18 January 2007, p. 11. The award was established by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802 to reward both soldiers and civilians for exceptional merit or bravery.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Billington, *Life and Work of Harold Pinter*. Faber and Faber: London, 1996, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Pinter, *The Midget (1950)*, *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948 - 1998* Faber and Faber: London, 1998, p. 108.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Pinter, *Message (1977)*, *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948 - 1998* Faber and Faber: London, 1998, p. 147.

Pinter draws a nightmarish prospect and explores the subconscious with vivid and terrifying images in *I Shall Tear off my Terrible Cap* (1951):

*And gob me up in a drunkard's lap.  
All spirits shall haunt me and all devils drink me;  
O despite their dark drugs and the digs that they rib me,  
I'll tear off my terrible cap.*

Besides the theme of menace and unexpected violence out of ordinary endeavors, his early poetry shows a zest for acting. One can trace the creative imagination of the promising artist rising from the turmoil of juvenile ambition. *New Year in The Midlands* (1950), *The Drama in April* (1952), and *The Second Visit* (1952) present Pinter's passion for acting. He pictures the low quality of life he experienced as a repertory actor with its hardship, commitment and joy:

*This is the shine, the powder and blood, and here am I,  
Straddled, exile always in one Whitbread Ale town  
(New Year in The Midlands).*

Living a life of a struggling young actor in London, Pinter implies his tough and sordid conditions along with feelings of tension and frustration in *The Drama in April* as he imagines the actors pitching tents in a spring decoration:

*And objects and props in the rain  
Are the ash of the house*

He is happy to be 'done with this repertory'. Similarly, *The Second Visit* describes the magic world of the stage:

*Now an actor in this nocturnal sink,  
The strip of lip is toothed away,  
And flats and curtains canter down. (The Second Visit).*

Being an only child<sup>8</sup>, Pinter has exploited poetry as an instrument to express his sense of conflict as a young man and his uncertainty about his identity. Hence a sense of isolation and loss is a common subject matter in his poems between the years 1951-1953. Evidently, *A Glass at Midnight* reflects the inner thoughts of a confused, lonely young man:

*Worlds within this box.  
I hold the cipher of the voided world.*

As a young man he feels the seclusion and insensitivity of the maturing self and attempts to fill in the void by writing poetry creatively using secret codes. He generates creative images to mirror his doubts and hesitations about religion with mysterious power:

*A religion that grows on the window.  
I let the glass drop. A bridge falls.  
Flatten the midnight on the fingered tightrope.  
All the dumb days draw on (A Glass at Midnight).*

These gloomy ideas of a developing mind reveal Pinter's complicated mindset.

Similarly in *Book of Mirrors* (1951), he expresses the phases in the process of growing up with vivid, remarkable, and creative images that materialize effortlessly in

<sup>8</sup> Michael Billington, *Life and Work of Harold Pinter*. Faber and Faber: London, 1996, p. 8.

the readers' mind. He creates inventive pictures in the mind's eye as the invited doves spawn in the house of his heart:

*May they breathe sweet; the shapes  
That ounced my glad weight  
With ripe and century fingers,  
That locked the skeleton years  
With a gained grief. (Book of Mirrors).*

His language can be unpredictable, but his poetry is work of a powerful mind and an original imagination. He continues depicting images of violence in many of the earlier poems which is reembodyed in *Jig* (1952) with such expressions as

*Seeing my portholed women  
Fall on the murdered deck,  
I rage in my iron cabin.  
Faster my starboard women,  
Spun by the metal breeze,  
Dance to a cut-throat temper. (Jig).*

By comparison, it is also interesting to observe Pinter as mastering the mathematics of poetic language in *A Walk by Waiting* (1953) through numerous permutations of words, ornate language and emotional images, 'alliterative stuff suggesting a writer passionately in love with language but not yet fully in control of it'<sup>9</sup>

*A walk by listening.  
A walk by waiting.  
Wait under the listening  
Winter, walk by the glass.  
Rest by the glass of waiting.  
Walk by the season of voices.  
Number the winter of flowers.  
Walk by the season of voices.  
Wait by the voiceless glass. (A Walk by Waiting).*

His early poetry employs intricate language filled with intelligent combination of words reflecting private passions of a promising artist. As the withdrawn artist of the 1950s and 1960s, his occupation was with the intricacy and arithmetic of language in his early poems as exemplified above. While Pinter discovers his own powers as a rebellious, struggling young artist, he professes early conflicts of emotion, intellect and language.

### **Irish Period**

The poems from Pinter's Irish period show a greater release of feeling which Pinter owes to his time he spent acting in Ireland. He acted in Anew McMaster's amateur travelling company in Ireland. In an interview Pinter told Mel Gussow that he 'toured Ireland with Mac for about two years in the early 1950s. He advertised in *The Stage* for actors for a Shakespeare tour of the country'.<sup>10</sup> Without a doubt, the influence of his tours in Ireland with McMaster has had a strong effect on his literary sensibility

<sup>9</sup> Michael Billington, *Life and Work of Harold Pinter*. Faber and Faber: London, 1996, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter*. Nick Hern: London, 1994, p. 110

which can be traced in his prose and poetry such as *Kullus*, *Episode*, and *The Queen of all the Fairies* in which he discovers private emotion, memory of past happiness, contentment, and a feeling of refuge. Furthermore, he had the chance to discover Samuel Beckett while working in Ireland.

He portrays Irish landscape in *The Islands of Aran seen from the Mober Cliffs* (1951) which captures marvelously the austerity and magnificence of these rocky isles seen from the stone of Connemara's head:

*The three whales of Aran  
Humped in the sun's teeth,  
Make tough bargain with the cuff  
And statement of the sea. (The Islands of Aran seen from the Mober Cliffs).*

Again as Billington argues Pinter 'fell in love both with the countryside, with the idea of Ireland, with the scenery of Ireland and with the language and texture of Ireland'<sup>11</sup> Correspondingly, *Poem* exemplifies how he has been charmed with the beauty of the rural Ireland. Ireland's natural magnificence has inspired him towards coining lyrical images to manifest private emotion through Celtic myth. He imagines a morning walk with his only wife in the idyllic surrounding of Irish topography:

*I walked one morning with my only wife,  
Out of sandhills to the summer fair,  
To buy a window and a white shawl,  
Over the boulders and the sunlit hill.  
But a stranger told us the fair had passed,  
And I turned back with my only wife. (Poem)*

As one joyous day turns out to be a moment of disappointment, the poetic persona recalls another day of summer fairs – a day of parting:

*The year turned to an early sunrise.  
I walked one morning with my only wife,  
Out of sandhills to the summer fair,  
To sell a candle and a black shawl.  
We parted ways on the sunlit hill,  
She silent, I to the farther west. (Poem).*

In *Poem*, the reader is reminded of a world of Yeats with peasants, shawls and summer fairs.<sup>12</sup> There is also an evocation of Yeats' *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* as the character goes to Innisfree in the morning to have some peace. Yeats idealizes and romanticizes a pastoral land where the cricket sings and 'midnight's all a glimmer' and 'noon a purple glow'. However the desired place that is to be reached is heard only 'in the deep heart's core' (Yeats, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*). Like Yeats, Pinter has a romantic approach to Irish geography – an idealized landscape which is not easy to arrive at. Pinter captures splendidly both the vulnerability of possession and the obsessive nature of love. He yearns for possession of his woman and a pastoral landscape, however he reaches a sense of isolation, loss and disappointment.

In retrospect, his poems which have been influenced by the romantic Ireland are his only poems exploring the beauty of nature reminiscent of Wordsworthian

<sup>11</sup> Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2006: p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Billington, 'Romantic Ireland', <http://baroldpinter.org>

romantic verse. Yet *Poem* finishes with the parting of the lovers. Here he explores feelings of personal sadness in a standard Yeatsian Irish form as he finally loses true love. In 1916 Yeats wrote in his *September 1913* 'Romantic Ireland's dead and gone', to criticize the new merchant class. Similarly Pinter draws a pessimistic picture of Aran with such terms as seeing 'Aran in mourning thumped to losses',

*Aran with its bleak gates locked  
Its back to the traders,  
Aran the widower  
Aran with no legs  
Aran without gain, pebbled  
In the fussing Atlantic. (The Islands of Aran seen from the Mober Cliffs).*

In addition *The Irish Shape* (1951) uses images from wild nature in order to explore private emotions and inner landscapes as the poetic persona expresses his aspiration for his lover and he agrees to remain from his lover only for the 'Irish shape', spring's time, passing of the sea and the silence in the Irish landscape. His 'Ireland' poems tend to be rural rather than urban, lyrical rather than imagist, often using Celtic legend and a bucolic life to express private emotion, loss, separation and solitude.

### **Anti-War Poetry**

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?<sup>13</sup>

Pinter's words show his objectives for writing anti-war poetry clearly. His anti-war poetry confirms an unavoidable preoccupation with what is actually happening beyond the politicians' rhetoric. These poems, which Pinter has produced in his maturity, denote the abstracted realities in today's world.

Today, as Palestinian and Israeli children and civilians die in a willful war, we need to re-read and understand Pinter's anti-war poetry even more carefully. His burden for responsibility for truth can be summed up in Ibrahim Yerebakan's words which suggest that

his work can be figured as a painful and rather grim reminder to every one of us that we are inhabiting and maintaining our insecure existence in a volatile and fragile environment after Auschwitz, after Latin American death squads, after ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in Rwanda in Kampuchea, and that we live in a world in which the Holocaust is still among the most appalling experiences of our post traumatic century and is still a potent force in the contemporary societies<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Harold Pinter, 'Art, truth and politics: Nobel acceptance speech'  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/dec/08/theatre.nobelprize>

<sup>14</sup> Ibrahim Yerebakan, 'Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes: The Holocaust Revisited*', 23<sup>rd</sup> All-Turkey English Literature Conference: *Evil in English Literature Proceedings (Istanbul: British Council, 2003)*, p. 158.

His anti-war poems, in which Pinter takes action as an outspoken critic of the war in Iraq as well as other hostilities, combine literal and symbolic meanings.<sup>15</sup> In poems like *Order*, *American Football*, and *Dead* he operates on concrete given situations that are all familiar to contemporary reader. While he employs mundane reality to imagine the deepest implication, he coins extraordinary and disturbing thoughts out of everyday reflections.

Billington argues that Pinter has a capacity 'for projecting a new view of ordinary life, of universalizing the essentially local'<sup>16</sup> Billington is fascinated by the style that Pinter can take ordinary speech and bring out its poetic quality, rhythms, repetitions, hesitations and its sudden flowerings into ecstatic speech, a talent whose example can be seen widely in *Order*. Pinter exploits the word 'order' as the key word and creates numerous permutations possible in the English language out of an ordinary word in order to explore the bitter reality:

*Are you ready to order?*  
*No there is nothing to order*  
*No I am unable to order*  
*And disorder feeds on the belly of order*  
*And order requires the blood of disorder*  
*Disorder an infant in a frozen home*  
*Order a soldier in a poisoned tomb (Order).*

Pinter reminds us of Aleks Sierz's *In-Yer-Face* and spits out words while portraying the injustices in a hostile world. His anti-war poetry is pretty realistic and clear. As the aura of enigma of the earlier poems is replaced by brutal facts, he exercises a rather dangerous language which is demonstrated bluntly in *American Football* (a reflection upon the Gulf War):

*Hallelullab!*  
*It works.*  
*We blew the shit out of them.*  
*We blew the shit right back up their own ass*  
*And out their fucking ears.*  
*It works.*  
*We blew the shit out of them.*  
*They suffocated in their own shit!*  
*Hallelullab.*  
*Praise the Lord for all good things.*  
*We blew them into fucking shit.*  
*They are eating it.*  
*Praise the Lord for all good things.*  
*We blew their balls into shards of dust,*  
*Into shards of fucking dust.*  
*We did it.*

<sup>15</sup> His poetry against the invasion of Iraq has helped earn him one of the highest awards for a modern writer on war. He was awarded the Wilfred Owen award for poetry, given biennially to a writer seen as continuing Owen's tradition for poems observing and distilling what he called "the pity of war". See also [John Ezard](#), Pinter awarded Wilfred Owen prize for poetry opposing Iraq conflict, *The Guardian*, Wednesday August 4 2004

<sup>16</sup> Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2006: p. 14.

*Now I want you to come over here and kiss me on the mouth.*

In this satirical poem, he uses obscene language to depict violent actions in an assertive and unbending mode. He argues that the realities are covered by rhetoric of militarism: General Schwarzkopf talked of ‘surgical bombing’ and ‘collateral damage’. Similarly, Perry Smith, a retired general and CNN analyst, claimed that the Gulf War would ‘set a new standard’ in avoiding civilian casualties. When an Iraqi air-raid shelter was hit, American officials quickly went on television and claimed that it was ‘a command-and-control facility’.<sup>17</sup> He also criticizes the peoples of the world for being self-censored, inactive watchers of atrocities. The same people who watched The Gulf War, a technological war with missiles, rockets and high-tech equipments on TV, watch the war between Israel and Palestine today. He uses patriotic words ironically in order to condemn the hypocritical language of bureaucracy on television and in the media. Another poem in which he denounces American foreign policy is *God Bless America* – a poem which describes the joyful ‘Yanks in their armoured parade’, galloping across the world in streets where the gutters are clogged with the dead. Pinter portrays the heads rolling onto the sand with horrid images of eyes that have gone out and the nose that only sniffs the odour of the dead while ‘all the dead air is alive with the smell of America's God’.

His fury at the Western democracies is illustrated as he associates the odor of corpses with the smell of America's God. His powerful denunciation of the hypocrisy of American governments is exemplified almost in every line. He continues his consideration of American political and military policies in his poems like *American Football*, *Death*, *After Lunch* and in other recent poetry, speeches, essays, and letters to newspapers, and in the dramatic works such as *The New World Order*, *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language*, *Party Time*, and *Press Conference*.

In *After Lunch* (2002) Pinter poses civilized images of officials who arrive at a place to have their lunch among the dead:

*And after lunch  
They loll and lounge about  
Decanting claret in convenient skulls. (After Lunch)*

The ‘head’ in *God Bless America* and the skulls in *After Lunch* alluded to repeatedly recall the horrific image that he has described of the child's head literally blown off by an American bomb in the Serbian marketplace in Nis. These poems continue to be worrying commentary on the American and British activity. Again in *Lust* (2004) Pinter draws horrific images of war, reminding us of the hostilities done to the Palestinians:

*The bombs go off  
The legs go off  
The heads go off  
The arms go off  
The feet go off  
The light goes out  
The heads go off*

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2006: p. 14.



*The legs go off*  
*The lust is up*  
*The dead are dirt*  
*The lights go out*  
*The dead are dust*  
*A man bows down before another man*  
*And sucks his lust (Lust)*

The repetitive strong images create a feeling absurdity of war and cruelty. His poems strongly express his artistic and political views. Since his winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005, his poetry has been distributed more widely in British periodicals, in print and electronic media and in the blogspheres on the internet.

Several of his passionately anti-war poems depict societies of yesterday, today and tomorrow and they will have eternal validity. One can read *The Bombs* to describe the present war between Israel and Palestine as ‘there are no more words to be said, all we have left are the bombs’<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, Pinter’s anger is directed at a hostile world once again in his speech at the University of Turin: ‘Human beings are so utterly vulnerable, so contingent on powers without pity, so scandalously naked to the techno-chemical fury of the Twentieth Century, that those who have a voice and a language must use it to create the record - by word in combination with unspeakable silence - of Buchenwald, Nagasaki, Vietnam, Chile, and Nicaragua.’ As the wars in the world take place continuously, we, as the helpless watchers, will have to ‘renegotiate our starting price’ in a world ‘Where we will kill or die or dance or weep, Or scream or shine or squeak like mice, To renegotiate our starting price’. (*Don’t Look*)

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Pinter’s poetry, like his dramatic work, has identified an inescapable sense of pessimism and alienation and investigated an alarming world of atrocities. After Pinter’s death, we need to appreciate his poetry even more for the reason that his collection of political poems, *War*, will never outdate in an age of unjust wars in the Middle East. On the whole, ‘*War* is a scream in the night that echoes down corridors of silence’<sup>19</sup> while all the democracies in the first world prefer to be inactive watchers. Accordingly, Pinter’s poems draw the attention to the shared image of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ anti-humanity and decline. By modifying his use of artistic creation into a more public activity in his maturity, Pinter has become a critic of Western democracies and his later works will function as agents of history.

<sup>18</sup> Harold Pinter, *The Bombs* in *The Essential Pinter* (Grove Press: New York and London, 2006), p. 400

<sup>19</sup> M. C. Gardner, ‘Harold Pinter’s *War*’. [http://www.anotheramerica.org/harold\\_pinter/s\\_war.htm](http://www.anotheramerica.org/harold_pinter/s_war.htm)

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