Text Matters, Volume 3 Number 3, 2013
10.2478/texmat-2013-0033

Paulina Mirowska
University of Łódź

Eroticism and Justice: Harold Pinter's Screenplay of Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*

ABSTRACT

A careful analysis of Harold Pinter's screenplays, notably those written in the 1980s and early 1990s, renders an illustration of how the artist's cinematic projects supplemented, and often heightened, the focus of his dramatic output, his resolute exploration of the workings of power, love and destruction at various levels of social interaction and bold revision of received values. It seems, however, that few of the scripts did so in such a subtle yet effective manner as Pinter's intriguing fusion of the erotic, violence and ethical concerns in the film *The Comfort of Strangers* (1990), directed by Paul Schrader and based on Ian McEwan's 1981 novel of the same name.

The article centres upon Pinter's creative adaptation of McEwan's deeply allusive and disquieting text probing, amongst others, the intricacies and tensions of gender relations and sexual intimacy. It examines the screenplay—regarded by many critics as not merely an adaptation of the novel but another, very powerful work of art—addressing Pinter's method as an adapter and highlighting the artist's imaginative attempts at fostering a better appreciation of the connections between authoritarian impulses, love and justice. Similarly to a number of other Pinter filmscripts and plays of the 1980s and 1990s, the erotic and the lethal alarmingly intersect in this screenplay where the ostensibly innocent—an unmarried English couple on a holiday in Venice, who are manipulated, victimized and, ultimately, destroyed—are subtly depicted as partly complicit in their own fates.

ABSTRACT

In the 1980s and early 1990s, while Pinter's playwriting was confined mostly to one-act plays and sketches, his interest in writing for the cinema surged, as did his political engagement. During the eighties, Pinter authored more filmscripts than in any previous decade, mainly adapting other writers' novels for the screen. His cinematic translation of John Fowles's famous novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* described by Gale as the dramatist's "most inventive and imaginative screenplay" ("Harold Pinter" 98), was released in 1981. It was soon followed by the film version of his own play, *Betrayal,* directed by David Jones. In 1982, Pinter wrote the screenplay of *Victory*, based on Joseph Conrad's novel published in 1915 (still unfilmed); *Turtle Diary*, adapted from Russell Hoban's book of the same name, was produced in 1985. The late 1980s brought Pinter's adaptations of Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, and Fred Uhlman's *Reunion*. All three films were concerned with violence and authoritarian urges: *Handmaid's Tale* in the future, *The Heat of the Day* in wartime Britain, and *Reunion* in Germany at the beginning of the Nazi era. Furthermore, in 1989, Pinter started working on the screen adaptation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, made into a film in 1993, and wrote the script for Ian McEwan's short novel *The Comfort of Strangers*, tackling the causes of violence and oppression on both the public and private level of human interaction.

Rather than providing a digression from the artist's playwriting career, Pinter's screenwriting seemed to supplement, even heighten, the dramatist's recurrent preoccupations, reworking them in imaginative and challenging ways. Already in his first film, and his first cinematic success, *The Servant* (1963), adapted from Robert Maugham's 1948 novella of the same name, Pinter creatively developed his favourite theme of dominance and subservience—the "battle for positions" (Pinter, "Art" 61) which appears repeatedly in his own plays from the stage debut, *The Room* (1957), onwards—offering an original insight into class and gender relations and expanding on what he had confronted in his dramas. What is significant, even though the films tended to diverge from the scrupulous fractal geometry of Pinter's theatre, they consistently investigated the intriguing links between the political and personal realms, exposing injustice and championing love, friendship, empathy and freedom from tyranny as the highest goods.

A closer look at the screenplays of the 1980s yields an illustration of how Pinter's choice of cinematic projects enhanced the focus of his political theatre in that decade, his relentless enquiry into the workings of power,

love and destruction and bold challenging of inherited dogmas. It seems, however, that few of the scripts did so in such a simple yet effective way as Pinter's disturbing fusion of the erotic, the political and ethical concerns in *The Comfort of Strangers*. The script, which, on the face of it, might seem a slight work in Pinter's canon, portraying the luridly perverse behaviour of an Italian couple who ensnare and brutalize naive English holidaymakers, in the end, fosters a better understanding of the relationship between love and justice. Similarly to a number of Pinter plays of the 1980s and 1990s, the erotic and the lethal become alarmingly intertwined in the screenplay where the ostensibly innocent, who ultimately fall victim to extreme cruelty, are depicted as, at least partly, complicit in their own fates.

Directed by Paul Schrader and released in 1990, *The Comfort of Strangers* is based upon McEwan's complex, deeply allusive text probing, among other things, the intricacies and tensions of gender relations and sexual intimacy. Many critics agree, quite rightly it seems, that Pinter's screenplay is not merely an adaptation of the novel, first published in 1981, but that it creates another, perhaps more powerful, work of art which can be analysed in its own right (Hall 87). According to Grimes, Pinter the screenwriter essentially respected the integrity of his sources and sought to preserve the author's original vision in the medium of cinema (145). Nevertheless, as the critic further emphasizes, "translation from text to screen is necessarily a co-authoring, permitting, if not requiring, interpretive shadings and outright changes on the part of the adapter," and the dramatist's "interpolations sometimes add topical or political edge to his sources" (145). Indeed, as Pinter himself insisted, commenting on his approach to screenwriting: "I don't just transcribe the novel; otherwise you might as well do the novel . . . these are acts of imagination on my part!" (qtd. in Gale, "Harold Pinter" 98). The alterations that Pinter effected in adapting *The Comfort of Strangers* for the screen provided him with some flexibility to pursue his characteristic interests and clearly added topicality to his source. The article will look at certain aspects of Pinter's ingenious adaptation, demonstrating, amongst others, how the dramatist's political conscience, integral to his artistic imagination, manifested itself in the screenplay of McEwan's novel.

The film centres upon Mary and Colin, an unmarried English couple on a holiday in Venice, capturing the novel's sense of claustrophobia experienced by a tourist entrapped in a foreign city, sequestered in a hotel room, secluded in a relationship with only one other person. The couple's dream of escape in the hope of reviving their failing union drives them into a relationship with an older couple, Robert, an Italian, and his Canadian wife, Caroline, which eventuates in Colin's macabre death. In Pinter's adaptation of McEwan's text—whose title ironically alludes to the final claim

of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* that she has always depended on the kindness of strangers (Williams 89)—The Venetian couple lure Mary and Colin into their destructive erotic fantasies, murder Colin and have sex over his body in front of the narcotized and incapacitated Mary. Unlike McEwan, Pinter in his script does not allow the murderers to escape but has them captured and incarcerated, provoking some compelling questions about the nature of justice.

It is no surprise that, with its atmosphere of menace emerging from apparently mundane circumstances and its disquieting conjunction of political and sexual themes—intimated already with the Adrienne Rich epigraph preceding the novel: "How we dwelt in two worlds / the daughters and the mothers / in the kingdom of the sons"—McEwan's text appealed to Pinter's imagination. The adaptation remains largely true to the feminist orientation of the source material by tracing Robert's fanatical sexism, his complacent commitment to oppressive patriarchal culture and glorification of the past, allegedly more stable and secure than the unsettled present. Importantly, Pinter also examines here the relationship between domination, cruelty and erotic pleasure, a perverse sadomasochism that culminates in Robert's horrific slaying of Colin, whose handsome physique attracts both Caroline and Robert and serves as a catalyst to the couple's sexual gratification.

It is worth noting, perhaps, that in contrast to Pinter's script, the city in McEwan's text is never specified, though clearly it is Venice. Indeed, as Malcolm insightfully observes, "[h]owever teasingly imprecise the novel's setting is, it does involve a complex intertextuality, allusive to a whole range of twentieth-century and earlier texts that have chosen Venice as a setting" (76). Above all, the novel could certainly be seen as an intriguing postmodern response to *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912), Thomas Mann's famous novella dealing with the interwoven themes of desire, forbidden passion, self-knowledge and (self-)destruction. But the Venetian locale and Colin and Mary's artistic background are also reminiscent of Pinter's own contemporary play *Betrayal* (1978). Moreover, the novel's holiday city alludes to one of the most controversial Pinter plays, *The Homecoming* (1965), which, similarly to *Betrayal*, associates Venice with romantic adventure, infidelity and threat. Like *The Homecoming*, *The Comfort of Strangers* connects sexuality to violence, and, similar to Pinter's subversive drama, McEwan's book garnered for the novelist a number of negative reviews: it was decried by some critics as sadly disappointing, "definitely diseased" and "quite hateful" (qtd. in Slay 72).[1]

[1] For a more detailed discussion of the novel's rich intertextuality, see, for instance, Malcolm 66–87.

Near the beginning of Pinter's screenplay, Mary and Colin wake up at night in their hotel room in Venice and decide to go out to look for an open restaurant. They quickly lose their tracks but, all of a sudden, Robert, dressed in a tight-fitting black shirt unbuttoned almost to the waist, a chain with a golden imitation razor blade and a camera round his shoulder, "*steps out of the dark into a pool of street light,*" and, blocking their path, volunteers to act as their guide (Pinter, "Comfort" 262). When Mary examines wall posters put up by Venetian feminists postulating the castration of convicted rapists, Robert ridicules feminist demands: "All these—are women who cannot find a man. They want to destroy everything that is good between men and women. They are very ugly" (263), and then he offers to take the hungry couple to a place where they could taste some "beautiful Venetian food" (263). Even though Mary is clearly impressed by the radicalism of Italian feminists, she does not object to Robert's sexist vilification of their political struggle and acquiescently follows him. And despite the fact that Robert ultimately fails to provide Colin and Mary with the nourishment they seek—as they soon discover there is no food in the bar recommended by their Venetian guide—rather than free themselves from Robert's oppressive company, the couple stay with him and question the man about his wife.

McEwan's text and Pinter's adaptation both highlight the familial origins of Robert's obsessive preoccupation with patriarchal domination and misogyny. Asked about Caroline, Robert relates a childhood incident, which, along with Sarah Woodruff's disclosure of her past in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Pinter, "French Lieutenant" 57–60), stands as one of the most elaborate narratives in Pinter's screenplays. Robert recounts how he once informed on his sisters after they wilfully used their mother's cosmetics and tried on her lingerie, which resulted in a severe punishment by their father, who beat the girls with a leather belt "without mercy" and made his son look on (Pinter, "Comfort" 269). A month later, the sisters avenged themselves in a grotesque way. They manipulated Robert into gorging himself on forbidden sweets, lemonade and an emetic, and then locked him in their father's study, which he stained with vomit and excrement. The boy incurred the wrath of his "revered" and "feared" father, who "nearly killed" him and then did not speak to the son for six months (270). The man's grim recollection is capped with a sinister assertion: "I have never forgiven my sisters" (270). In his adulthood, Robert becomes fixated on patriarchal authority, victimizing women and abiding by the morals of his despotic father whose indignation and unbending severity still haunt his memory.

The novel's emphasis on the authoritarian father figure is markedly enhanced in Pinter's screenplay. As rightly pointed out by Burkman, while

in McEwan Robert relates his story only once, Pinter accentuates the significance of the relation by interspersing partial narrations throughout the script (39). It is noteworthy that the son's tendency to idolize the father, as well as the male dread of sexual ambiguity, are recurrent themes in Pinter's playwriting. Similarly to Max's father in *The Homecoming* or the father of the country in *One for the Road* (1984), Robert's father, a respected Italian diplomat, can be seen as one of Pinter's representations of the powerful father figure who is looked up to for his personal and social authority. The father inculcates the son with traditional values that guide his personal and political life and shield the son from sexual "confusion" (Pinter, "Comfort" 291).

Significantly, Robert's repressed anger, initially directed at his sisters, later finds release in his relationship with Caroline. When the two get married, they indulge in violent sexual pleasures that result in Robert's breaking his wife's spine while making love. At one point in Pinter's script, Caroline divulges to Mary the "strange things" (318) that she and Robert used to do before Robert's extreme aggressiveness turned her into an invalid:

> Soon after we were married Robert started to hurt me when we made love. Not a lot, enough to make me cry out. I tried to stop him but he went on doing it. After a time I found I liked it. Not the pain itself—but somehow—the fact of being helpless before it, of being reduced to nothing by it—and also being punished, therefore being guilty. I felt it was right that I should be punished. And I thrilled to it.
> It took us over totally. It grew and grew. It seemed never-ending.
> But there was an end to it. We both knew what it was. We knew what it had to be. We knew it. We wanted it. . . .
> My back happened—suddenly—one night. It was very bad indeed. . . . So I'm like this. . . . He's terribly strong, you see. When he pulled my head backwards I blacked out with the pain—but I remember thinking: It's going to happen now. I can't go back on it now. . . . This is it. This is the end. (316–17)[2]

Alarmingly, Caroline's disability and the acute pain she experiences do not put a halt to the couple's liking for sadomasochistic acts but only propel their search for other sources of erotic stimulation.

Robert's unwavering commitment to the patriarchal order founded on male violence is effectively demonstrated in the scene where the host displays his father's personal items to his guests during Colin and Mary's stay at his Venetian apartment. Robert makes his views about male-female

[2] Where sentences have been omitted in the passages quoted from Pinter's filmcript, the ellipses are indicated by four periods (. . . .); three periods (. . .) represent the original suspension points within Pinter's text.

relations explicit in words which Pinter transcribes, almost verbatim, from McEwan's text:

> My father and his father understood themselves clearly. They were men and they were proud of their sex. Women clearly understood them too. Now women treat men like children because they can't take them seriously. But men like my father and my grandfather women took very seriously. There was no uncertainty, no confusion. (Pinter, "Comfort" 291)[3]

When Colin jokingly describes his host's residence with its precious paternal paraphernalia as "a museum dedicated to the good old days" (291), Robert strikes him hard in the stomach with his fist, sending the young man jack-knifing to the floor. Again, rather than react to Robert's use of brute force or part company, Colin chooses to brush the whole incident aside and accepts the invitation to dinner.

When the couples discuss the concept of freedom, Robert expounds his disturbing political stance and his vision of a "pure" society that needs to be guarded from "perverts":

> ROBERT. So how is England? Lovely dear old England? Hampshire! Wiltshire! Cumberland! Yorkshire! Harrods! Such a beautiful country. Such beautiful traditions.
> MARY. It's not quite so beautiful. Is it, Colin?
> . . . .
> ROBERT. In what way? In what way not beautiful?
> MARY. Oh, I don't know—freedom . . . you know . . .
> ROBERT. Freedom? What kind of freedom? Freedom to do what?
> MARY. Freedom to be free!
> ROBERT. You want to be free? (*He laughs*.) Free to do what?
> MARY. You don't believe in it?
> ROBERT. Sure I believe in it. But sometimes a few rules—you know—they're not a bad thing. First and foremost society has to be protected from perverts. Everybody knows that. My philosophical position is simple—put them all up against a wall and shoot them. What society needs to do is purify itself. The English government is going in the right direction. In Italy we could learn a lot of lessons from the English government.
> COLIN. Well, I'm an Englishman and I disagree violently with what you've just said. I think it's shit.
> ROBERT. I respect you as an Englishman but not if you're a communist poof. You're not a poof, are you? That's the right word, no? Or is it "fruit"? Talking about fruit, it's time for coffee. (292–93)

[3] To compare with Pinter's source, see McEwan 73.

It could be argued that through the character of Robert, stigmatizing homosexuality and yet apparently fascinated with Colin's physical appearance, Pinter suggests a coincidence between sexual insecurity and authoritarian tendencies. According to Grimes, like in the fascistic societies depicted in the dramatist's political plays and sketches of the 1980s and 1990s, Pinter draws here "an equivalence between suppressing civil liberties and an attitude that violently fears and castigates anyone who transgresses socially enforced binary distinctions" (153). In Robert's political view, couched in a moralizing discourse, violence supplants reason; "hatred and fear are the true basis for relating to the social other" (Grimes 153).

The ominous idea of "purifying" the society postulated by Robert features strongly in Pinter's political playwriting exposing, and opposing, political tyranny and persecution. In *The Hothouse*, written in 1958 and first staged two decades later, in 1980, Roote, preoccupied with tradition investing life with a sense of order and exalting the integrity and chastity of dead forbears, supplies a metaphor with truly unsettling implications that resurfaces in Pinter's post-1980 political theatre. He insists that the world should be "kept clean for the generations to come" (248), antedating Nicolas, the self-righteous interrogator-*cum*-persecutor in *One for the Road*, as well as Lionel and Des, the duo of oppressors in the political sketch *The New World Order* (1991), who—shortly before inflicting torture upon an unnamed blindfolded victim—feeling "so pure," ecstatically congratulate each other on performing the moral duty of "keeping the world clean for democracy" (276–77).

The scene focusing on the characters' discussion of freedom interpolated in Pinter's screenplay is interesting in other ways, too. It aptly conveys the artist's mounting dissatisfaction with the radical socio-political changes that were taking place in Britain after the election of the Thatcher government in 1979. Pinter's biographer, Michael Billington, stresses that "[c]oncern at growing intolerance, at the tendency towards intellectual conformism and at the low level of political debate was . . . widely felt in Britain in the late 1980s" (307). The area that especially vexed the dramatist was the undermining of what he regarded as fundamental liberties taking place "under Mrs Thatcher's regime" (Pinter, *Various Voices* 229). In the script, Mary's deploring of a diminution of freedom in England effectively invokes the subject of civil rights being "challenged and corroded" in the 1980s (qtd. in Billington 306). Robert's offensive comments about "perverts" and "poofs" apparently allude to Section 28, known as Clause 28, of a proposed British government bill which sought to forbid public authorities, including schools, "to promote homosexuality" or to advocate "the acceptance of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (Billington 307). By comparison,

Pinter's source lacks such topical political references; McEwan refrained from associating Robert so explicitly with a concrete right-wing agenda. "By foregrounding timely sociopolitical issues," as Burkman has perceptively noted, "Pinter . . . makes the screenplay less general, more immediate, more urgent than the novel" (51).[4]

Rather than tackle Robert's destructive instincts, Mary and Colin, once again, recklessly disregard the host's verbal aggressiveness, as well as some other alarming indications that herald the tragic ending. Instead, on their return to the hotel room, the couple indulge in their own violent erotic fantasies:

> MARY. (*casually*) Oh, I forgot to tell you. . . . I had a rather good idea. . . . I'm going to hire a surgeon—a very handsome surgeon—to cut off your arms and your legs. . . . Yes. And then you'll be quite helpless, you see. I'll keep you in a room in my house . . . and use you just for sex, whenever I feel like it. . . . And sometimes I'll lend you to my girlfriends . . . and they can do what they like with you. . . .
> COLIN. Yes, I've come to this decision. . . . I'm going to invent a machine . . . you see . . . made of steel. It's powered by electricity. It has pistons and controls. . . . It has straps and dials. It makes a low hum. . . . And you'll be strapped in . . . you see . . . quite securely . . . tight . . . and the machine will fuck you—not just for hours and weeks but for years and years and years. For ever. (300–02)

During their teasing exchange involving images of brutality inflicted upon each other, from which the lovers clearly derive sexual titillation, Mary pictures having her partner's limbs amputated, retaining Colin "quite helpless" to serve as a sexual object for her and her girlfriends' gratification (301). The apparently innocuous objectification of Colin by Mary foreshadows the man's literal victimization in the script, for on the last day of the couple's stay in Italy, Colin will, indeed, have his body mutilated by Robert, who will cut the young man's throat to increase his sexual arousal with Caroline. It seems noteworthy that Mary and Colin's rekindled interest in the erotic and their intense lovemaking is induced, as suggested in Pinter's screenplay, by their encounter with Caroline and Robert. It is after their first visit to the Venetian couple's house that the two cocoon themselves for a few days in the privacy of their room, excluding the rest of the world. They carelessly engage in a feast of narcissistic and erotic pleasures, shunning the normal duties of adult life.

---

[4] To learn more about Pinter's strong views on the suppression of freedom effected by Clause 28 in 1988 which could be related to Robert's disturbing political stance in the screenplay, see, for example, Gussow 68–69.

Even though the two couples conspicuously differ, Pinter also probes here, and undermines, the conventional polarities between good and evil, or innocence and culpability. Robert and his wife may be driven by destructive urges, but their victims, Colin and Mary, are not entirely without fault. Both couples seem to be equally limited in their perception of what love is, or what it should be. However, unlike Robert and Caroline, Mary and Colin come across as rather disoriented and unable to commit themselves to a definite course of action, which precipitates the final horror. After the couple's first meeting with Robert, Mary, feeling entrapped in Venice, compares their stay in Italy to "a prison" and suggests returning home (275). While it is, to a degree, a prison of circumstance—they are a couple of tourists in a foreign city—the seclusion is also of their own making.

Robert's recollection of his childhood disobedience and his father's cruel retribution, repeated three times in the screenplay, is paralleled by Mary's narration of "the worst thing that ever happened" to her (255). As a little girl, she was excluded from a gang of kids because, without bothering to find out that she was seen as an inadequate member, Mary inadvertently applauded her own rejection and voted herself out. It could be argued that Mary's story reflects, to a certain extent, the decisions she and her partner make, or fail to make, during their Italian holiday, revealing how the characters' painful pasts still haunt them through their adult lives, affecting the present. Such self-involvement proves as numbing as the opiates used by Caroline to stupefy and paralyze Mary when she and Robert ensnare and attack Colin. The actual narcotic, in turn, accentuates Colin and Mary's isolation and their sleepwalking-like conduct. The couple's blatant disregard of the alarming evidence at their disposal and failure to act prudently ultimately cost Colin his life.

While Pinter largely strove to remain faithful to his source material—exploring the novel's linkage between patriarchy and violence—he also used his position as a screenwriter to illuminate questions implicit, yet undeveloped, in McEwan's text, introducing additions and alterations that corresponded with his own political concerns. Mary's "terrible" story of expulsion, which is Pinter's own invention, is a case in point. According to Grimes:

> In Pinter's imagination, exclusion was a political motif, perhaps the one in which his entire statement about politics might be condensed. To exercise power is to exercise the power of exclusion; groups "integrate" themselves . . . by defining some of their members as unworthy. To banish is a primal urge, and to be banished is an unforgettable experience. The tendency to form groups, with their innate desire to produce conformity and exclusion, is a central manifestation of human cruelty. Thus the pattern of exclusion running through Pinter's work . . . has meaning on both psychological and political levels. (150)

The unsettling portrayal of social groupings and group ethics in Pinter's "committed" drama from the 1980s onwards has been noted by Mark Batty (117–19). Indeed, the complacent leaders of the well entrenched systems dramatized in Pinter's political plays and sketches legitimize the repressive measures they employ by professing their adherence to moral codes and shared values ensuring communication and safeguarding social order. During his gruelling cross-interrogation at the end of Act One in *The Hothouse*, the hapless Lamb is asked whether he wants "to join a group of people in which group common assumptions are shared and common principles observed" (237). Nicolas in *One for the Road* assures the tortured dissenter of his authority, flaunting his patriotic feeling: "I feel a link, you see, a bond. I share a commonwealth of interest. I am not alone. I am not alone" (232). Batty suggests:

> Throughout his political plays, Pinter sought to demonstrate that the seemingly innocent desire to belong to a group and play one's part in an ordered society can never be wholly free of political exploitation, and that the impulse to participate and the comfort of sharing ethical values can easily degenerate into the rejection and castigation of those who dare to question the motives behind that participation and the basis of those ethical values. (118)

While the desire for commonality is understandable, coexisting within a society necessarily entails a range of mature responsibilities, and Pinter's writing of the 1980s and 1990s, both for the stage and for the screen, invariably sought to sharpen his audiences' awareness of such challenges.

The novel and the screenplay may initially lead one to believe that Mary will be the potential victim. As Hall argues, "In typical patriarchal narratives a man attempts to win, save, seduce, and overcome a woman in order to demonstrate his prowess. He is the actor; she is merely the means by which he demonstrates his ability to act" (92). However, the later scenes in which Caroline drugs Mary, leads her to their bedroom and shows her the wall covered with dozens of photographs of Colin taken secretly by Robert make it apparent that Colin is the object of the couple's desire, "the spectacle to be viewed to facilitate their voyeurism and . . . sadomasochism" (Hall 92). Caroline confesses: "We became so close, incredibly close. Colin brought us together. It was my idea to put him here on the wall—so that we could see him—all the time, as we fucked" (320), while Mary eventually comes to realize that Robert had followed them in Venice and intentionally lured Colin to his apartment. "It was as if God was in on our dream. I knew that fantasy was passing into reality," Caroline adds (320). The woman's comparison of Colin to God is a mere

projection, since the young man generally comes across as rather infantile and ineffectual, but it sheds light on the imaginary fuel that incites Robert and Caroline's consuming desire.

Colin's desperate pleading with the duo of his victimizers to fetch a doctor for Mary and reveal their intentions is answered with Robert's sinister "I'll show you what we want" (323); the man takes a razor from his pocket and slits Colin's throat. Next, as Colin is sliding slowly down the wall to the floor, Robert begins to make love to Caroline, while Mary, dazed by the narcotic, sits across the room staring at the twitching body of her lover (324). The woman cannot move or speak, but what she registers as a numb, catatonic onlooker is the dangerous underside of the erotic world that she and Colin have misinterpreted as a remedy for the problems in their own relationship. Their final sitting positions facing each other—Mary's paralyzed body in a chair, Colin's shrunken corpse slumped by the wall—further reinforce the sense of the couple's lethargic passivity, their practically acquiescent participation in Robert and Caroline's intrigue and lethal fantasy.

Interestingly, unlike the bewildering cross-examination of Stanley Weber in Pinter's early comedy of menace *The Birthday Party* ("Birthday" 57–63), premiered in 1958, or the vicious interrogation scenes in the torture plays of the 1980s and 1990s, the questioning of Mary by the Italian police in the screenplay of *The Comfort of Strangers* has a valid point. The officer's legitimate queries: "What did you want from these people?" (325), "Why did you come to Venice? What were you looking for?" (326), and Mary's vacant, confused responses expose the couple's limited self-awareness and their dilatoriness in taking steps that could have personally saved them.

Whereas Robert and Caroline appear to be perversely resolute in pursuing their desires, however aberrant, Mary and Colin lack a clearly acknowledged purpose to their lives, or find it difficult to openly verbalize their desires. While, at first, Mary seems inclined to sustain her relationship with Colin, when he, rather begrudgingly, suggests cohabitation, ineptly professing his love for her, the woman just smiles and remains diffident: "Yes, but . . . we don't have to . . . commit ourselves to all that . . . just now. I mean . . . it's such a lovely day. . . . [W]e'll see. Shall we?" (308–09). Mary's hesitant answer may spring from her disillusionment at the man's failure to propose marriage, as well as be motivated by her recognition of Colin's inadequacy as a life partner or the insufficiency of their union. Whichever the case, the scene makes the couple's immature reluctance to commit themselves acutely palpable.

Even though Pinter's people generally perceive themselves as affable and well-intentioned beings impelled by love, in fact, they all share a reduced view of love that does not develop beyond physical fascination and becomes a destructive passion eventuating in estrangement from others

and, thus, detrimental to relationships and communities. And while it is Caroline who, at one point in *The Comfort of Strangers*, relates how her husband injured her when they were making love, in the end, all of the characters in the script turn out to be crippled or destroyed by lust which they mistakenly interpret as love.

The final scenes in Pinter's adaptation, which dramatizes the failure of erotic attraction and sexual desire to evolve and bring about action effecting positive change, prompt one to reflect upon the nature of justice. In contrast to McEwan's novel, where the murderous couple eventually abscond unpunished, in Pinter's screenplay, Robert and Caroline are apprehended and subjected to police interrogation. According to Prentice, while "the happier ending" of Pinter's version might have contributed to the film's commercial success, it also raises some vital questions concerning the workings of justice, and, in particular, retributive justice (302). "The traditional happy ending of seeming-evil people getting a just reward is challenged as resolving nothing at all," the critic suggests; clearly, no punitive measures administered by the judicial system can redress the loss of life (302). What is important,

> [t]he crime here is not entirely of two perverted, evil people plotting against two innocents, nor is the point to promote distrust of strangers . . . But rather, the screenplay dramatises survival predicated on a need to trust one's own best insights, coupled with some knowledge of what one wants, and what one ought to want. (Prentice 302–03)

Indeed, in *The Comfort of Strangers*, like in a number of Pinter's grim political plays and sketches, only those liable to aggressiveness and tyranny openly articulate their ominous aspirations and efficiently turn them into reality. Crucially, in neither couple portrayed in the screenplay does love reach out beyond the individuals concerned to include others.

The last word in Pinter's script is given to Robert. Interrogated by two detectives about the crime he has committed, the man shows no remorse. Pinter calls here into question "the cherished Western masternarrative" that confession has a cathartic value, or that it can convincingly account for one's present doings (Prentice 303). When probed about his motives, the perpetrator only smiles and, with the same self-righteous assurance he displayed earlier, once again, reverts to his account of the punishing father figure, a story whose credibility by now has been considerably undermined. The man's recitation, which could serve as the author's final statement on the limits of language and psychoanalysis to supply a past cause for the present state of affairs, calls to mind the dramatist's early defiant protestations concerning his audiences' "desire for verification," which is "understandable but cannot

always be satisfied" (Pinter, "Writing" 11). The narrative delivered by Robert to exonerate himself elucidates little and, thus, typically of Pinter's *oeuvre*, the responsibility for finding answers to any troubling questions that remain is assigned to his audiences.

The majority of plays and screenplays authored by Pinter from the 1980s onwards reflect the artist's preoccupation with the evils that human beings are capable of visiting on one another in their relationships on both the micro and macro level of social interaction, frequently in the name of love and justice. In the adaptation of McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*, reconciling the small scope of presentation with a much larger scope of implication, through his depiction of love reduced to erotic desire and its dangerous conjunction with violence and abuse of authority, Pinter tackles the question of love's necessary correlation with justice. What the script attempts to impress upon us, similarly to his political writing of the 1980s and 1990s, is the necessity to reconsider the misguided, or narrow, view of love—and of justice—to which his characters, as well as his audiences, tend to adhere. While Pinter, alarmingly, suggests individual complicity in exclusion, suffering and oppression directed at persons and groups, he also implies our capacity for compassion and sustaining life, seeking to further the importance of accepting a deeper and wider understanding of love, conducive to renewal rather than annihilation of life.

Whether writing for the stage or the screen, Pinter consistently sought to awaken his audiences to the disquieting realization of human potential for cruelty and complacent disinvolvement by confronting us with a set of events that elude a facile explication and teasing with disturbing ambiguity. He skilfully transferred agency from the stage, or screen, to the viewer, compelling us to ask questions, and, in questioning, to begin to look for answers, and to act. Both his playwriting and filmscripts urged his audiences to recognize our own self-absorbed individual isolation and passivity, to make conscious choices, and, most importantly, to counter the habit of moral apathy and assume responsibility for decisions and actions that perpetuate violence and injustice. Such recognition, in Pinter's ethic, could result in an attitude and action indispensable for survival and "restoring what is so nearly lost to us—the dignity of man" (Pinter, "Nobel" 17).

Works Cited

Batty, Mark. *Harold Pinter*. Horndon: Northcote, 2001. Print.

Billington, Michael. *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter.* London: Faber, 1996. Print.

Burkman, Katherine H. "Harold Pinter's *Death in Venice: The Comfort of Strangers*." *Pinter Review: Annual Essays 1992–93*. Ed. Francis Gil-

len and Steven H. Gale. Tampa, Florida: U of Tampa P, 1993. 38–45. Print.
Gale, Steven H., ed. *The Films of Harold Pinter*. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2001. Print.
---. "Harold Pinter, Screenwriter: An Overview." *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*. Ed. Peter Raby. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. 88–104. Print.
Grimes, Charles V. *Harold Pinter's Politics: A Silence Beyond Echo.* Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2005. Print.
Gussow, Mel. *Conversations with Pinter.* London: Hern, 1994. Print.
Hall, Ann C. "Daddy Dearest: Harold Pinter's *The Comfort of Strangers*." *The Films of Harold Pinter*. Ed. Steven H. Gale. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2001. 87–98. Print.

Malcolm, David. *Understanding Ian McEwan*. Columbia, South Carolina: U of South Carolina P, 2002. Print.
McEwan, Ian. *The Comfort of Strangers*. London: Pan, 1982. Print.
Pinter, Harold. "The Art of the Theatre." Interview by Lawrence M. Bensky in *The Paris Review,* 1966. *Pinter in the Theatre.* Comp. Ian Smith. London: Hern, 2005. 49–66. Print.
---. "The Birthday Party." *Plays One*. London: Methuen Drama, 1989. 17–97. Print.
---. "The Comfort of Strangers." *Collected Screenplays Three*. London: Faber, 2000. 242–328. Print.
---. "The French Lieutenant's Woman." *Collected Screenplays Three*. London: Faber, 2000. 1–138. Print.
---. "The Hothouse." *Plays One*. London: Methuen Drama, 1989. 201–77. Print.
---. "The New World Order." *Plays Four*. London: Faber, 1998. 269–78. Print.
---. "Nobel Literature Lecture 2005: Art, Truth and Politics." *Pinter Review*. Nobel Prize/Europe Theatre Prize Volume: 2005–2008. Ed. Francis Gillen and Steven H. Gale. Tampa, Florida: U of Tampa P, 2008. Print. 6–17.
---. "One for the Road." *Plays Four*. London: Faber, 1998. 221–48. Print.
---. *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948–2005.* London: Faber, 2005. Print.
---. "Writing for the Theatre." *Plays One*. London: Methuen Drama, 1989. 9–16. Print.
Prentice, Penelope. *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic*. New York: Garland, 2000. Print.
Slay, Jack, Jr. *Ian McEwan*. New York: Twayne, 1996. Print.
Williams, Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire.* London: Methuen, 2009. Print.