

Peter Finch

'The Student House'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Peter Finch (1947–) is a writer, editor, and arts promotor from Cardiff. His prolific career from the 1960s onwards has encompassed a wide range of literary forms. Although perhaps best known for his work as an avant-garde poet, he has written many poems in a more conventional mode, as well as prose, including non-fiction, historical writing and psychogeography.

Finch began writing poetry in the early 1960s. Despite now being known as a ‘thoroughgoing experimentalist’,¹ he was at that time a contemporary of the ‘Second Flowering’ of Welsh poetry in the English language, a movement led by poets such as John Tripp, John Ormond and Sally Roberts Jones. These poets were known for their plain-speaking, accessible style, and a poetry that addressed matters of Welsh culture, society, place, and identity. Finch’s early work can be read alongside such poets; as he wrote in his introduction to his 1997 *Selected Poems*, ‘The idea to deviate from the accepted did not occur to me until I had been writing for a number of years.’² However, from 1966–75 Finch set up and edited *second aeon*, a small press experimental poetry journal that developed an international reputation. In these years, Finch began to innovate with new modes of poetic practice, heavily inspired by the visual arts, experimental music, and postmodern American poets such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Frank O’Hara and Gregory Corso. Much of his subsequent work, as Nerys Williams notes, ‘bypasse[d] the formal and stylistic preoccupations of his Welsh contemporaries’.³ His avant-garde work is wide-ranging and complex, but in general it deviates from the conventions of lyric poetry, which primarily uses verse as a vehicle for the expression of personal experience. He moved towards a style concerned with language itself, and with challenging and disrupting the conventions of traditional poetic practice. As Finch himself has noted, ‘it is a perfectly respectable approach to make poetry from not what is inside the head but from the swirl of words outside it.’⁴

(1) John Goodby and Lyndon Davies, *The Edge of Necessary: An Anthology of Welsh Innovative Poetry 1966–2018* (Aquifer Books, 2018), p. 21.

(2) Peter Finch, ‘Introduction’, in *Selected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 1997), p. 7.

(3) Nerys Williams, ‘Peter Finch: Recycling the Avant-garde in a Welsh Wordscape’, in Daniel Williams, ed., *Slanderous Tongues: Essays on Welsh Poetry in English 1970–2005* (Bridgend: Seren, 2010), p. 114.

(4) Finch, ‘Introduction’, *Selected Poems*, p. 8.

That said, Finch has never been afraid to work in more accessible modes; rather his poetry can be said to veer between experimental and more traditional forms. He has been described as possessing a ‘double-headed vision of the world – seen through both modernist and anti-modernist eyes’.⁵ *Food* (2001), the collection from which ‘The Student House’ is drawn, is a characteristic combination of Finch’s experimental and lyrical writing. Many of the poems in the collection are inspired by more mundane aspects of lived experience: restaurants, tedious work meetings, repairing a light-switch in an aging parent’s house; yet these are interspersed with poems possessing more modernist, experimental sensibilities and techniques.

Alongside his writing, Finch has worked in several roles connected with the promotion of Welsh literature and the arts, from managing the Welsh Arts Council’s Oriel Bookshop in Cardiff from 1973–1998, which became an important centre for literary culture in Cardiff during that period, to chairing Academi, the precursor to Literature Wales, an organisation tasked with promoting Welsh literary culture in English and Welsh. Since 2001 he has edited the successful *Real Wales* series of psychogeographical guidebooks, including authoring the volumes *Real Wales* and four *Real Cardiff* books, as well as many other works of non-fiction. In 2022 he published a dual-volume *Collected Poems* spanning work since 1968. He lives in Cardiff and is still a prolific writer and an active contributor to the Welsh literary scene.

(5) ‘Peter Finch: Food’ <http://www.peterfinch.co.uk/food.htm>

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'The Student House' is a conspicuously straightforward, understated title. This may not appear noteworthy, but given Finch's predilection for experimentation, it stands out. Take the titles of some other poems from the same 2001 collection: 'Words Beginning With A from the Government's Welsh Assembly White Paper' (in which the poem really does consist only of words beginning with the letter A); 'Spending Money in Soviet Russia'; 'Good Names For Cats'. The plainness of the title signals that this is not an experimental poem, but written in a more restrained, accessible style, one perhaps more appropriate to personal reflection. Indeed, the poem describes a visit to the speaker's son's student house. In reflecting on the episode, the poem addresses the changing nature of paternal relationships, maturity, and the transitions between phases of one's life. By naming the poem after an (archetypal) location, it arguably recalls Finch's interest in exploring wider stories, identities and connections to place.

Form.

In contrast with some of Finch's more experimental works, 'The Student House' is more traditional in a formal sense. Where avant-garde poetry deliberately problematises the notion of a lyrical 'I', 'The Student House' is written from the perspective of a single speaker and is a poem that appears to draw and reflect on personal experience. Structurally, however, the poem is somewhat freeform: it consists of a single stanza, thirty-four lines in length, and written in the present tense. There is no regular rhythm or rhyme scheme, and line-breaks are interspersed with enjambement. However, this loose formal structure arguably contributes to the poem's sense of realism: it mimics a sort of stream-of-consciousness that reflects the immediacy and emotional potency of the episode and allows the speaker to explore the associations and sensations of the experience. As in real life, where everyday experience is not systematically structured, but experienced haphazardly, from moment to moment, the poem itself is formally untidy. Moreover, as we shall see, the informal structure of the poem also reflects the untidiness of the setting and theme.

The language in which the poem is written further contributes to a sense of ordinariness. It does not draw upon a highfalutin literary idiom, or even, as in many of Finch's other works, an experimentalist, playful use of language, but primarily from an everyday vernacular. The importance of Finch's use of this quotidian language is that it bespeaks and creates a tension with the unspoken significance of the episode it describes. The poem is in fact a meditation on a profound moment of transition in a father-son relationship, a moment (or a process, given the six-month-old letter in the hall) in which a son enters a new phase of adulthood, and the father himself enters a new phase of fatherhood, no longer the paternal authority figure he once was. The bathetic language Finch employs captures the taut emotional tension of the scene in way that heightens its quiet drama.

Lines 1-13.

The early lines of the poem set the scene and establish its tone. It is worth noting the poem's alternating use of pronouns throughout: the poem switches between the use of collective first-person pronouns ('we' and 'us') and singular ('I' / 'He'). This expresses the shifting nature of the speaker's relationship with his son: the use of collective pronouns implies a togetherness, a bond between the two men, whereas the singular suggests a kind of emotional separation between them. Indeed, the central theme of the poem is the emotional dynamics of a parent-child relationship, and the ways these can shift and change through life.

The scene is a wintry day in which a father accompanies his son to the messy student house in which he has been living. Perhaps they arrive after a Christmas break, since the house has been abandoned: **'where / no one has been for three weeks'**, the absence emphasising that this is not fully a home. The pair walk through **'thin snow'**. Here the poem uses pathetic fallacy to reflect the iciness of the father-son relationship. This echoes the popular idiom to **'walk on thin ice'**; that is, to proceed carefully in a precarious situation, which perhaps suggests the speaker feels he is on precariously thin emotional 'ice' with his son. The speaker notes that the **'ice has turned the air to knives'**, reflecting the idea that the atmosphere between the two men is not only cool and tense – on a knife edge – but perhaps even hostile. Indeed, this first section of the poem contains numerous references to violence, albeit comic: the redness of the **'ketchup-smear[ed] plate'** hinting at the idea of blood, as well as the **'stains across the / sofa'** that make it **'look like someone has died'**. Also note the use of enjambement in these lines: the untidy spilling over of sentences across lines reflects the messiness of the house itself. The emotional tension appears partly to come from the father's disapproval of his son's living situation. He notices the dirty plates in the **'unemptied / kitchen sink'**: the verb **'unemptied'** implies a judgement on the son's lazy neglect of cleanliness. There is also comedy in these lines, particularly in the absurd image of a **'river of lager / cans flow[ing] down the hall'**, yet the father's sense of disapproval in noticing the mess seems to contribute to the emotional tension.

In addition to the comic references to violence, the speaker infuses a sense of the gothic into the scene. The house is portrayed as being haunted: **'As I stamp into the lounge / keeping my feet alive the ghosts / of dust come up around me like children.'** These lines encapsulate the poem's overarching mode: the juxtaposition of the literal, quotidian nature of the situation and the emotional (perhaps repressed) tension that simmers beneath it. Under the guise of keeping his feet warm, the speaker metaphorically stirs up **'ghosts'** like **'children'**. This refers not only to the house itself – like most shared student houses, the property would once have been home to a family – but also to the speaker's relationship with his son, who is now no longer a child but entering a new phase of adulthood, which has itself changed the nature of the speaker's paternal role. In a sense, someone has died: the **'child'** that the speaker fathered has now gone forever, having moved from his own family home and transitioned into adulthood. Perhaps the speaker is also remembering his own days as a student. Of further relevance here are the multiple connotations of the use of the verb **'stamp'**. In one sense the speaker is literally stamping to keep his feet warm, but to **'stamp'** could also be viewed as an act of petulance – an impatient child **'stamps'** their feet, perhaps hinting that there is an ironic emotional immaturity to the way the father is handling the situation. As elsewhere in the poem, the father-son dynamic appears to be in flux.

Lines 14–24.

Here the poem shifts towards a focus on the terse, ineffective communication between the speaker and his son. Until now, there has been no recorded speech between the two. Now the speaker notices among the rubbish on the floor a letter that he had written to his son **'six-months / back'**. **'It's up to you, I wrote, / you are on your own now, no one can do this for you, / something like that.'** The letter appears to have been an attempt to offer his son fatherly advice upon leaving home for university, perhaps an attempt to instil a sense of independence. **'It's up to you'** can be understood both as a choice and a transference of responsibility and agency. The fact that the speaker finds it strewn on the floor suggests that the letter didn't quite have the effect he was hoping for; yet this allows him to reflect on why the gesture may have been ineffective: the informal way the speaker dismisses the content of his own letter – **'something like that'** – seems to be a comment on the absurdity of his attempt to communicate in such a formal way with his own son.

Communication is clearly fraught between father and son: notably, the only line that could be read as recorded speech is ambiguous: **'Do we clear this place?'**. The ambiguity of the phrase is notable: is it actually spoken by the son, or is it a part of the speaker-father's internal monologue? If spoken by the son, it could be understood to be an attempt to ask the father for advice or approval; yet at the same time it is he who is initiating a sense of action, which perhaps places him in the role of adult in a way that again reflects the changing dynamic between the two men. Equally, if it is a line of internal monologue, it could be a reflection of the father's own inability to address the situation. Moreover, the question could be understood more broadly to refer to the effort to clear the air between them, and to initiate more open communication. The phrase that follows is similarly ambiguous: the fact that neither of them seem to **'be bothered'** could on one level be read as sort of stropily detached emotional lassitude, yet on another a shared acceptance of the emotional reticence that exists between them, which is perhaps itself a form of conciliation.

Lines 25–34

If these lines suggest of an emotional impasse between father and son (**'the energy has been/frozen out of us'**), the final lines of the poem hint at an effort to establish a new understanding between them. Attempting to take on the mantle of the responsible father, the speaker goes to the basement **'to see if I can fix the boiler'**. The speaker is ironically aware of the symbolism of this seemingly mundane act: he notes that he feels **'no / longer in charge but still trying, / the fallen king'**. The phrase **'fallen king'** is ironically and humorously grandiose, yet it encapsulates the fact that the father-son dynamic is changing: he is no longer the **'king'** of the household now that his son has become an adult and moved into his own house. Yet the father is still able to provide for his son: he helps him by successfully lighting the boiler, **'and the heat comes back, / a kind of love, pressing us softly'**. This image of emotional thawing poignantly concludes the poem by reversing its earlier tropes of icily terse communication. While communication between them is still attenuated – the two men do not physically touch, and the implication is that they both feel somewhat awkward as they **'stand saying goodbye / amid the junk mail'** (junk mail which, we can assume, includes the speaker's letter to his son). The fact that the speaker returns to the use of the collective pronoun in these lines, **'we'** and **'us'**, suggests a kind of reconciliation.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

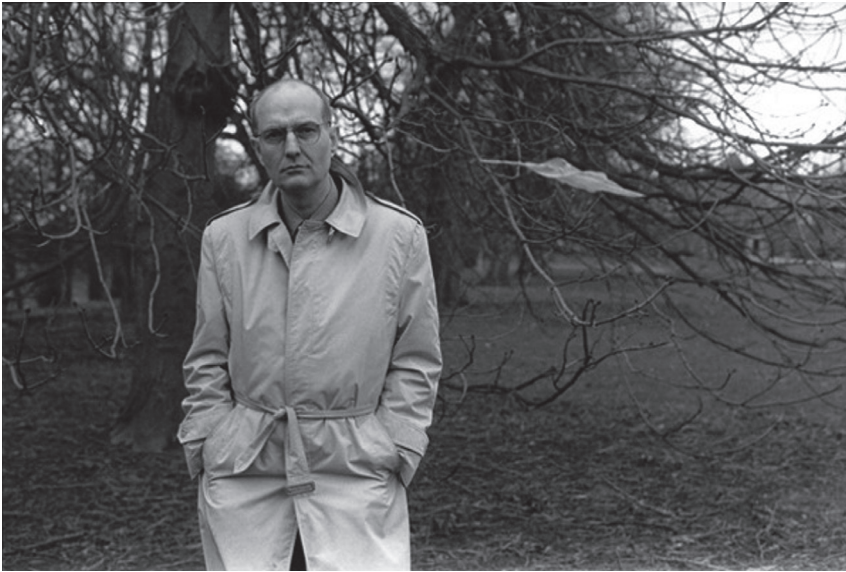
On the face of it 'The Student House' is about an awkward interaction between a father and his son who has moved away from home to attend university. Interestingly, the poem is not about the first goodbye to the son as he moves out of the parental home, which would itself have been a momentous occasion, but instead about a rather more mundane return to the son's house perhaps after a Christmas break. Yet the mundanity of the situation belies the emotional significance of what occurs: the father-speaker appears to come to a realisation about the changing nature of his role as a father now that his son is becoming independent.

Outside his poetry, Finch has written extensively as a psychogeographer. Psychogeography is a literary form that explores the complex symbolism of spaces and places. It is therefore unsurprising that Finch should write a poem that demonstrates a sensitivity to the symbolic significance of the physical space of a student house. The house of the poem itself becomes a metaphor for the untidy nature of parental relationships with children growing into adulthood: messy, fraught with awkwardness, and sometimes hostility and coolness, but also love. Although it plays with ideas of comic absurdity and the gothic, it could be argued that, at its core, the poem is a realist depiction of the clumsy, anticlimactic nature of father-son relationships. There is no mawkish dramatic commentary on parenthood, just a quiet acceptance of the ever-changing nature of family relationships and, indeed, life itself.

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- How is the house depicted in the poem? What kinds of descriptors and metaphors are used? What is the significance of these?
- What acts of communication occur between the father and son in the poem? What words does the poet use to describe or evoke communication or other connections?
- Do you think the poem sentimental in its depiction of a father-son relationship?
- Is this a poem about students or fathers? What evidence can you find to support either answer?
- How would you describe the atmosphere of the poem, and does this change as the poem progresses? If so, how?

PHOTOGRAPHS



Top: Peter Finch. Photo: Bernard Mitchell 1997



Right: Peter Finch launching the *Collected Poems*, Hay Festival, May 2022. Photo: Sue Finch

There are more photographs of Peter Finch on the author's website:
<http://www.peterfinch.co.uk/photpf.htm>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Peter Finch's personal website: <http://www.peterfinch.co.uk/aboutpf.htm>

YouTube video of Finch speaking about and reading his work:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZLu9-6wCKg&ab_channel=serenbooks

Website containing archival images of *second aeon* magazine:

<http://dlib.openlib.org/home/johnnyever/home.html>

FURTHER READING

Peter Finch, 'Introduction', in *Selected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 1997), p. 7.

John Goodby and Lyndon Davies, *The Edge of Necessary: An Anthology of Welsh Innovative Poetry 1966–2018* (Aquifer Books, 2018), p. 21.

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Nerys Williams, 'Introduction', in Andrew Taylor, ed., *Peter Finch: Collected Poems One 1968–1997* (Bridgend: Seren, 2022)

Nerys Williams, 'Peter Finch: Recycling the Avant-garde in a Welsh Wordscape', in Daniel Williams, ed., *Slandorous Tongues: Essays on Welsh Poetry in English 1970–2005* (Bridgend: Seren, 2010), p. 114.

Dr Kieron Smith

*CREW, Swansea University
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Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe



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