



LINGUISTIC TORTURE AS POLITICAL CONTROL IN HAROLD PINTER'S ONE FOR THE ROAD

S.N.Nigora

Abstract. *One for the Road* (1984) is written by Harold Pinter as a theatrical warning against the ongoing dangers of state control, unfair imprisonment and violence with the use of language as a tool to undermine existing social ideology. Pinter criticised modern political rulings by focusing on a family accused of an unstated crime by an unnamed state. By analysing the tactics of Nicolas who symbolizes authority, I argue that Pinter's work can offer an in-depth analysis of how political repression not only victimises innocent people but also destroys their identity. This conference paper will reveal how Pinter uses language as a weapon to describe how totalitarians torture and control their prisoners verbally and psychologically in order to fulfil their own agendas by exposing the realities of political suppression. By analyzing the scholarly sources, this analysis shows the enduring power of Pinter's work in masterfully showing the human toll of authoritarian ruling and stifling protest, offering a crucial reminder of the importance of vigilance against authoritarianism.

Keywords. One for the Road, politics, human rights, abuse, political issues, authoritarian.

Introduction



Harold Pinter is known as a voice for human rights and a critic of authoritarian and American political policy through his dramatic plays and other works for his absurd language. He not only participated in political discussions, human rights rallies and anti-nuclear activities but also became a political activist in public condemnations of American and British foreign policy concerning human rights. This activism stemmed from his own childhood experience of World War II and as a political activist. What Pinter intended to write about in *One for the Road* was to shed light on Kurdish people's condition in Turkey, as Pinter was horrified by two Turkish women who considered Turkish prisoners as deserved communists to be raped, given electric shocks, rearrested and charged with insulting the state. By making the setting unspecific, Pinter made the play seem to suggest the idea that such actions may take place in at least ninety countries, which we can also see from his *Writing for Myself*, where he wrote, "I'm convinced that what happens in my plays could happen anywhere, at any time, in any place, although the events may seem unfamiliar at first glance. If you press me for a definition, I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism." Pinter wants us to be alert to the current political problems that can happen in this alarming, vast, incomprehensible world.

In *One for the Road*, the characters deliberately use language to shape specific responses and influence the dynamics of the relationships they are involved in. In accordance with this, Austin Quigley characterises it as a battle maintained through language;



This battle[i.e., the battle for position within a relationship], in the Pinter world, is grounded in the power available in language to promote the responses that a speaker requires and hence the relationship that is desired. It is here that the link between language and the relationships is established, and it is here that we must concentrate our attention.(238)

Quigley acknowledges that Pinter's plays mainly rely on language to define relationships. By closely observing the language used in *One for the Road*, we can learn more about the effects of political power and conflicts that drive their interactions.

Dramatic Analysis of *One for the Road*

One for the Road is a one-act play comprised of four short, terrifying scenes. In contrast to Ruben Moi's view that they are unusually short and allow no room to explore thematic concerns or develop individual characters (31), I would argue that Pinter's plays are intentionally and successfully written. Pinter's skill with language is demonstrated by his ability to portray complex ideas and today's issues concisely. His writing style heightens the tension and critical thinking and draws the audience's attention fully throughout the performance. Therefore, I believe that the short length of Pinter's plays should not be interpreted as an issue but rather as an aspect that defines his work in the theatre.

In the play, suave, unctuous, well-mannered Nicolas, who acts as the chief of the police force, questions in turn a 30-year-old man called Victor, his wife Gila and their son Nicky. The play takes place in an enclosed room with the absence of communication with the outside world which intensifies the psychological interaction between Nicolas and the characters who are the focus of humiliation.

In Act 1, Scene 1, Nicolas orders to bring Victor (223), who comes bruised with torn clothes which is an obvious indication of his torture by the soldiers from the very beginning. Neither does the drama specify Nicolas' rank nor does it provide information about Victor's crime or innocence. From the beginning till the end, Nicolas tries to force Victor to confess false facts in order to demonstrate his guilt, exposing his previous history of violence and brutality. Nicolas can be described as a political figure with power over the others, as implied in his speech:

You may have noticed I'm the chatty type. You probably think I'm part of a predicable, formal, long-established pattern; i.e., I chat away, friendly, insouciant, and I open the battle. As it were, in a light-hearted, even carefree manner, while another waits in the wings, silent, place coiled like a puma. No. No. It's not quite like that. I run the place. God speaks through me. I'm referring to the Old Testament God, by the way, although I'm a long way from being a Jewish. Everyone respects me here. (225)

This is evident in his claim that "God speaks through me," can be interpreted as a metaphor for his authoritarian and oppressive nature. Here, Nicolas pretends to be a desperate world leader who uses divine religion and absolute power to justify his position of authority in a way that appears to be caring. The reference to the Old Testament God suggests that his deeds have the approval of God. According to Pinter,





And you only have to look around you to see world leaders doing exactly the same thing. George W. Bush is always protesting that he has the fate of the world in mind and bangs on about the 'freedom' loving peoples' he's seeking to protect. I'd love to meet a freedom-hating people. But in the rhetoric of global politics there is a total dichotomy between words and action; and that, in part, is what I'm writing about in this play. (1-2)

I happen to agree that Nicolas and George W. Bush's claim to protect the world from political leaders is politically hypocritical, as they are politically bankrupt and morally scabrous, while Pinter believes peace and stability cannot be achieved through biased attacks on innocent people. He then says to Victor, "We are all patriots; we are as one. We all share a common heritage. Except you, apparently. Pause. I feel a link, you see, a bond. I share a common wealth of interest. I am not alone. I am not alone." Nicolas aims to underline that Victor is hated by society and that what he is doing is socially acceptable. The main reason for Victor's abuse is that he is not patriot enough so that he must endure the brutality.

Nicolas says: "You're a civilized man" (223), "You are a man of the highest intelligence" (224). This shows Victor possesses exceptional intelligence which can pose a threat to the authority since intellects are hard to corrupt and they can express their beliefs, thoughts easily for the functioning of ideology. Then Nicolas continues to torment Victor by making a malicious remark to Victor's son: "Is your son all right?" (228). Even though he knows very well about the condition of the son, he pretends to be concerned. In order to humiliate him more, Nicolas even mentions his wife asking questions that reveal his inner ugly world, saying, "You're probably wondering where your wife is. She's in another room. Good-looking woman" (323).

Austen Quigley highlights how family bond exploitation occurs when abusers use emotional links among relatives as a means through which they can inflict suffering upon those who belong there.

Here at the edge of the civilized world, inhuman acts are justified by individuals who invoke general social bonds as a justification for abandoning them in the case of dissenting individuals. Indeed, part of the torture to which the victims are subjected consists of turning the psychological and emotional bonds of a family group into weapons to be used against each of them. (11)

I agree that the family's strong emotional and psychological connections can be manipulated and turned against them as a method of control and punishment in cruel ways, especially if they are considered to be more sensitive to brutality.

The second interrogation scene focuses on the seven-year-old son Nicky, to whom the questioner asks straightforward questions about his likes and preferences, but there is one question about why he likes his parents that the son is unable to answer. The fact that he is unable to communicate his feelings to his parents points to a potential emotional gap or miscommunication, which may stem from various factors like fear, trauma, or a lack of understanding. When Nicolas asks about the soldiers, Nicky admits he doesn't mind being a





soldier, but he doesn't like "soldiers of honour" (244) openly. Nicolas responds, "They don't like you either, my darling" (237). Nicky Prentice describes the word "darling" as a term of endearment, which here ominously conveys the child's death sentence" (279). Nicolas believes children should be brought up to be obedient to the ruler, which we can see during the conversation between Mrs. Victor and Nicolas.

He's a little prick. You made him so. You have taught him to be so. You had a choice. You could have encouraged him to be a good person. Instead, you encouraged him to be a little prick. You enough him to spit, to strike at soldiers of honour, soldiers of God.(24)

His anger and attack towards soldiers eventually led to his death, which can be implied in the final scene when Victor inquires about his son and Nicolas comments, "He was a little prick" (336). To me, it also suggests that Pinter has hinted that Nicky may pose a more dangerous threat by standing in front of society against the existing ideology in the future, so that he ought to be murdered. Pinter, I assume, criticises the authority members for not even caring about the innocence of children. In fact, all the violent actions are done off-stage only showing the results to increase the severity of the violence.

When it comes to Gila, she is also mistreated like her spouse and raped several times by soldiers and Nicolas, which is obvious in terms of her clothes and bruised body. She has to put up with Nicolas's verbal abuse as well as physical assault: "Have they been raping you? How many times, exactly? "How many times have you been sexually assaulted?" (243). According to Nicolas, Gila is unable to meet the demands of ideology as a mother and a daughter. She is unable to educate Nicky in line with ideological requirements or take over her father's career. Gila is reminded of her father, who seemed to have held a prominent position within the state. In doing so, he highlights once more the difference between a "good" and a "bad" subject:

Your father was a wonderful man. His country is proud of him. He's dead. He was a man of honour. He's dead. Are you prepared to insult the memory of your father? *Pause.* Are you prepared to defame, to debase, the memory of your father? Your father fought for his country. I knew him. I revered him. Everyone did. He believed in

God. He didn't *think* like you shitbags. He *lived*. He lived. He was iron and gold. He would die, he would die, he would die, for his country, for his God. (240)

Attempting to teach Gila, Nicolas portrays her as a failure of Victor and herself, but a model citizen, a "good subject" who struggled for the sake of his nation.

In the final section of the play, there is a conversation between tidily dressed Victor and Nicolas when the questioner sarcastically asks how he has been and whether he is surviving.

Victor: It is my mouth

Nicolas: Mouth?

Victor: Tongue.

Nicolas: What's the matter with it? (244-245)

It is necessary to mention Gottlieb's opinion here before further interpretation:



The protagonist's experience and fate is [sic.] tragic in the sense that it deals with irrevocable loss on the personal level: he or she loses his [or her] position, his beloved, his freedom, and . . . faces a loss possibly even worse than the loss of life: the loss of his private, individual identity.(13)

Despite the fact that Victor and Gila are released eventually, Nicolas damages their ability to speak freely by having Victor cut off his tongue, Gila scarred by rape and their son died. In the end, it is evident here that Victor becomes powerless and loses his hope for the future in the face of such occurrences.

Conclusion

Pinter's *One for the Road* is one of his well-known dramatic plays, which concentrates on powerlessness and power. He explored how today's uncivilized authorities threaten human rights, innocence and justice in the family of Victor through the character of Nicolas, who is considered the ideal "good subject." His masterful use of language, especially in the dialogues and verbal violence can present the nature of political control and the images of dehumanization. It can be concluded that this play can act as a symbolic warning to the viewers to raise awareness and participate actively in fighting for human rights from real political ambiguities on stage and off stage.

Works cited

Billington, Michael. "*The Live and Work of Harold Pinter.*" London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

Pinter, Harold. "*One for the Road.*" Samuel French, 1984.

Pinter, Harold. "*Writing for Myself, Plays Two.*" London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

Prentice, Penelope. "*The Pinter Ethic, The Erotic Aesthetic.*" *Studies in Modern Drama*, vol. 3. London: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000.

Quigley, Austin. "*The Pinter Problem.*" Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.

Quigley, Austen. "*Pinter, Politics and Postmodernism.*" *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, edited by Peter Raby, Cambridge University Press, 2001.