

POWER, POSITION, AND AGONY IN HAROLD PINTER'S ONE FOR THE ROAD

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This paper attempts a Foucauldian analysis of power, position and agony in Pinter's *One for the Road* (1984). Pinter was a leading British political playwright in the 20th century. In his plays, he focused on the political situation in private and distinguished between power have and power have not: the oppressor and the oppressed. In the play *One for the Road*, he brings out the impact of power and position on people, leading to their agony. Through the course of the play, he describes different dimensions of power. The aim of this study is to discuss how Pinter has depicted the abuse of power and position, causing agony by the totalitarians controlling and subduing the people, from a Foucauldian perspective.

Introduction

Harold Pinter is a well-known British absurd playwright. He is a prolific writer who has written extensively for film, radio and television, and won several awards. He is known for the Theatre of the Absurd and the comedy of menace. His plays consider human existence in terms of purposelessness, nothingness, suspended sense, lack of meaning, and the challenge to one's identity. The uniqueness of his style led to the adoption of the term 'Pinteresque', commonly used to describe dark threatening situations in which people become victims of their own internal feelings, desires and guilt, even though their lives seem superficially normal. Pinter's later works have attempted to arouse audiences "to recognize the realities" of the world, especially the grimmest and most destructive realities. That recognition, however, can only be a starting point for action. His work provokes more than intellectual or even emotional response. It engages the audience as an equal participant in the play's action by calling for action. His work does so by forcing identification with both the torturer and the tortured which is a familiar technique in his work.

Published in 1984, *One for the Road* portrays the element of torture. The play is set in a small closed room and covers one day: "Morning", "Noon" and "Night". In the play, Nicolas, a military officer, tortures a family. He captures the wife and son of Victor and imprisons them in a room. The family members undergo the panic of isolation. Every second, their souls are loitering in wilderness lacking confidence and awareness. Pinter introduces two groups of people in *One for the Road*; one is from Great Britain or America, and another is from an English speaking country among civilized people. Pinter focuses on political power, powerlessness

and torture. He presents picturesquely the torture and oppression of ordinary people in their everyday life. He brings out the impact of power and violation of human rights on the common people, onto the stage. *One for the Road* is a powerful psychological drama with disturbing violent scenes of a rape and a murder. Pinter clearly states that the members of the family are affected by the officer, who is in command of the people. He tortures them and passes sexual comments. He tortures not only these members but also the civilized people. Both these members and the civilized people are obviously tortured, as their 'clothes' are 'torn' and they are 'bruised' (Pinter 1984: p. 31, 61).

Review of Literature

Prentice (2000) said that *One for the Road* was written on a trip that Pinter took with Arthur Miller to visit Turkish prisons in the 1980's. He also observed that the play examined the torture of three family members: a man, a woman, and their son. Bates (1984) elucidated the meaning of the play through "one image that lingers indelibly" in the audience's mind. For him the play was about a man who is sleek, calm and vicious, drinking whisky, treading the thick carpet, circling his wounded victim with the casual sadism of absolute power. Styles (2008) analyzed Pinter's theme of the play as faith, punishment, and paranoia. He added that the play had a fast steely script that did not make time to question power structures overtly. Contemporary performers had to be diligent and inventive in finding fresh psychology and subtext. This one-act play enacted on a small stage was set in the regime of a totalitarian state. The audience understood the theme in a very short period of time, because Pinter brought out the agony of the trapped family and one smug man vividly. James (2011) referred to Antonio Fraser's view that *One for the Road* was an angry cry against the evil of torture, documentation of what happened when human bodies were hurt in reaction to political dissidence. Incidentally, Antonio Fraser was the second wife of Pinter. Pinter forced the audience to look at torture, and challenged them to dismiss it as something irrelevant that only happened to other people.

Coulter (2009) proved that people were much tortured by their need for love. Once again, in pointing to problems at a societal level, Pinter revealed a clear awareness that the real problem lay in the weakness of people. Pinter did not supply the play with specific geographic details as it portrayed the brutish violence of the state police's interrogation of a family as something that could happen anywhere. "The well furnished office of Nicolas in *One for the Road* relates the audience to the torturer and reveals that he is a person like anyone else. He is not an imaginary villain, but a real person. Pinter indicated that anyone can become an aggressor like Nicolas or an officer; all a person needs is the thrill of being in a powerful position" (Worth 1987). Cahn (1998) stressed the power with which language was utilized in Pinter's plays. Pinter's unique sense of utilizing the quirks of the English

vernacular to the extent of creating realistic dialogue resulted in the term 'Pinterese', or 'Pinteresque' language (Esslin 1984). The term refers to the tendency in Pinter's plays to deal with 'implications of threat and strong feeling produced through colloquial language, apparent triviality, and long pauses' (OED). Perhaps the term stemmed from Pinter's at times evacuated childhood: 'His prime memories of evacuation today are of loneliness, bewilderment, separation and loss: themes that recur in all his works' (Billington 1996). Visser (1996) confirmed the communication torture in *One for the Road*. The major element in this play was a scene in which an innocent victim was interrogated by a cruel tormentor. Although the words of the interrogators did not 'mean' anything, they succeeded in communicating their message, i.e. by using verbal torture they forced their victims into submission.

Prentice and Grimes discussed the concept of power in their works. Grimes (2005) examined the confrontation between extreme power and extreme powerlessness in *The Homecoming*. Perhaps, Prentice is the only critic who has studied power in *One for the Road*. However, she has not applied any Foucauldian concept in the play. Hence, this paper attempts a Foucauldian analysis of power, position and agony in *One for the Road*.

Foucauldian Concepts

Michael Foucault was a well-known anthropologist in the 20th century. He analyzed power, position and agony from various perspectives: understanding of power, leading away from the analysis of actors who use power as a mechanism, an oppression, and still away from the careful structures in which those actors manage, near the thought that 'power is everywhere', diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1991). 'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere', this sense is neither an organization nor a structure (Foucault 1978). 'Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, but something one holds on to or allows to slip away' (Foucault 1978). The power is a 'meta-power' or 'regime of truth' that encompasses society, and which is in continuous change and negotiation. Foucault uses the term 'power/knowledge' to indicate that power is comprised through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding and 'truth': Power is also an important cause of social authority and consistency. Foucault pointed to a new kind of 'disciplinary power' that was observed in the governmental systems and social services that were created in 18th century Europe, such as prisons, institutions and mental hospitals. Foucault's approach to power goes beyond politics and sees power as an everyday, socialized and embodied experience. This is why state-centric power struggles, including revolutions, do not always lead to a change in the social order. Foucault's concept of power is so subtle and removed from organization or structure that there seems to be little scope for sensible action.

Foucault's work depicts the relationship of position to other. His moral principles are concerned with the power of governance that the position has over itself in its articulation with human relations to others. The power that certainly exists between the position and others is 'a question of government' where this is characterized broadly as 'the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed' (1982). The power is associated with Foucault's ideology because "the 'basis' for governance is 'freedom', that is the relationship of the self to itself and the relationship to the other". Foucault articulates that, if each position can resist the other's strategies of power, the relation becomes agonistic: a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle... a permanent frustration (1982). For example, in sexual and affectionate relations, one manipulates power over the other in open-ended strategic games' where 'the situation may be reversed' (1978).

Power

Power is a quintessential feature, especially, of Pinter's later plays. Hence, the concept of power is examined comprehensively with reference to various critical viewpoints. According to Esslin (1984), power is generally considered to mark a new departure in Pinter's openly political plays, almost a political pamphlet. For Gussow (1996), every work of Pinter is not political violence. However, Pinter's plays show how power or violence is used or how an individual is threatened or subjugated. Merritt (1993) says that "political plays present today's political essentials of life simply and indicate that the use of metaphor in Pinter's early plays has now been replaced with a need to present the 'brutal facts' as they are". According to Quigley (1975), Pinter is grounded in the power of language to promote the response that a speaker requires and hence the relationship that is desired. Pinter's plays function primarily as a means of dictating and reinforcing relationships. For Silverstein (1993), politics is a constant negotiation of power relations among characters that should be firmly inserted in the context of the dominant cultural/symbolic order the plays inhabit. For Sofsky (1999), "power abrogates itself in the act of killing, the death of the other, and puts an end to the social relationship". Thus critics have discussed power relations among characters in Pinter's plays from different points of view.

One for the Road portrays the existential fear which is never just a philosophical abstraction. It is, ultimately, based on the experience of a Jewish boy in the East End of London, of a Jew in the Europe of Hitler. Pinter himself made this point very clear in his first play *The Room* (1957a). The old woman Rose lives in a room, which she thinks is the best house. In fact, she refuses to know anything about what is happening outside, not even in the basement. Although her room is damp and nasty, she finds it comfortable and secure. However, an intruder Mr. Kidd comes in and upsets her life. Rose's delusion is thus exposed at the end of the play.

The Birthday Party (1957b) is about Stanley, an erstwhile piano player, who lives in a seashore boarding house, run by Meg and Petey. The house is situated in an English seaside town, off the south coast of London. Two intruders, Goldberg and McCann, who attend Stanley's supposed-to-be birthday, appear to have come looking for him. They turn Stanley's birthday party organized by Meg into a nightmare. The intruders are the ones who fix Stanley's birthday and torture Stanley. Pinter continues to deal with torture in *One for the Road*. In this play the actual physical violence takes place off stage. He indirectly dramatizes such panic and agony through verbal and non-verbal clues from the off-stage acts of repeated rape of Gila, physical torture of Victor, and the murder of their son, Nicky. The causes of the violence that takes place off stage are, however, described verbally and non-verbally on stage.

Pinter's characters "proceed tenuously, speaking minimally, amid frequent pauses, as if wary of revealing a particle of information about them that might make them vulnerable. Pinter's female characters have been branded as iconic and intriguing; dark, threatening and enigmatic, sexual and alluring; the male characters at once desire them and detest them. Pinter is concerned with the battle for power between the sexes; the personal domestic politics of male-female relationships that seemed consistent with the issues of the day" (Baldwin 2009). Pinter seeks out in his plays each and every nook and corner of his pendulous pauses before reading the next lacerating line. Extreme fear and agony in the new state of helpless solitude remain unarticulated; there is no appropriate language of expression. "The language, therefore, is dominated by unanswered questions that lead to repeated questions, awkward pauses, stifling silences and repetitions" (Baldwin 2009).

Pinter's language becomes as much an instrument of power as sexual characteristics in the battle of gender domination in the plays of the early 1960s. *One for the Road* was written during the Thatcher Government in the UK and Reagan in the US. The battle of power is conducted by overt means. A character verbally attacks other characters with insults and abuse. The officer tortures the families at the moment of play itself, within the emotional feelings of Victor and his wife, father and son. Victor is the only person who takes care of his family, because his family members are hidden and tortured in separate rooms.

The power Nicolas commands over Victor and his family is being wielded principally to destroy the risk that Victor and people like him represent to the ruling elite. Nicolas explains that he has been given direct authority to deal with anyone that might oppose the policies of the government.

Nicolas: Do you know the man who runs this country? No? Well, he's a very nice chap. He took me aside the other day... Nic, he said, Nic (that's my name), Nic if you ever come across anyone whom you have good reason to believe is getting on my tits, tell them one thing, tell them honesty is the best policy (Pinter 1984, p. 48-49).

Victor's silence serves not only to isolate Nicolas, who is the key focus on-stage, but also to create a bond with the silent audience. His few utterances in the first scene also go some way towards indicating that Nicolas is 'of negligible influence', at least as far as Victor's rebellious spirit is concerned.

Nicolas' expressed sense of shared identity enacts at the level of voice the kind of renunciation of self that it describes. As Nicolas becomes interpellator within "the man who runs this country's" speech, recognizing 'himself' in the image of the collective one with which his subjectivity merges, his voice dissolves into the monolithic voice of state's power.

Nicolas: I have never been more moved, in the whole of my life, as when...the man who runs this country announced to the country: 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 commonwealth of interest. I am not alone. I am not alone!

Silence (Pinter 1984, p. 50-51).

Nicolas' comments vividly illustrate the homogenizing energy of the monologic world: the 'link' he feels does not arise from unmediated experience but is discursively produced, the defining characteristic of the subject position with which the speech encourages him to identify. Once located within that position, Nicolas becomes a 'mouthpiece' for a power that always exceeds him: 'I run the place. God speaks through me' (Pinter 1984, p. 36). A tension, only partly resolved by Nicolas' position of authority with the state, exists between the different claims of power advanced by these two statements. Pinter is not suggesting that Nicolas lacks power, but that Pinter carefully distinguishes between power and the subjects it constitutes.

As Foucault (1978) observes, the status of the subject as an effect of power implies a kind of ontological gap that precludes an absolute equation of the subject with power. The subject, in other words, may be dislodged from the position it occupies without fundamentally altering the dominant forms and relations of power, a point Pinter vividly illustrates at the end of the play. Pinter, however, never associates this instability at the level of the subject with instability at the level of state's power itself. Nicolas may one day find himself alive in the global world not fit to live in the place of Nicky. But Pinter suggests that the state itself, in Barthes' (1997) words, "is not only what returns, it is also especially what remains in place. In Pinter's dramatic universe, what he would call, at the risk of tautology, the power of power lies precisely in its nature as a beyond, that which is located elsewhere rather than within the subject itself".

Position

The battle for positions in human relationships, the everyday incidence which Pinter sees as the prospective for violence, is the source of dramatic action in *One for the*

Road. In this play, the conflict determines dramatic structures. Pinter illustrates the operation of various strategies of dishonesty, overt calculation, threats of violence in his explorations, and sexually tortured, not physically, but mentally, which progresses by means of gradual revelations of the nature of the characters' underlying intentions. Due to the tolerance and even support of such human rights abuses by the governments of Western countries like the United States, Pinter emphasizes in *One for the Road* how such abuses may occur in other countries too.

Pinter depicts the originality of the language and delivers the ordinary feelings in front of the audience. The affected person communicates well, but Pinter's communication is a continual evasion where desperate attempts are made to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too disquieting. Regarding his use of silence, Worth says, the more acute the experience, the less articulate its expression" (Worth 1971). Pinter's plays establish the 'outsider' from the opening of the first action and this 'outsider' is more often than not, also the victim. Pinter's treatment of Gila is an important comment on the treatment of Jewish women. Nicolas is ambivalent towards her, yet he willingly rapes her: Is Nicolas suggesting that Gila and even Victor are suffering from Stockholm syndrome and that they have fallen in love with their captor? If so, his role as the shocking contrast between the ordinariness of the surfaces and the horrors beneath is Pinter's obsessive theme. Victor sits on a chair when Nicolas waves his finger into his face. Victor does not open his mouth because of his circumstances.

Nicolas: What do you think this is? It's my finger. And this is my little finger. This is my big finger and this is my little finger. I wave my big finger in front of your eyes. Like this. And now I do the same with my little finger. I can also use both...at the same time. Like this. I can do absolutely anything I like. Do you think I'm mad? My mother did. (Pinter 1984, p. 33).

Further, Nicolas recalls his intimate interaction with Gila, primarily to torture her husband.

Nicolas: Your wife and I had a very nice chat, but I couldn't help noticing she didn't look her best. She's probably menstruating.

Tell me...truly...are you beginning to love me?

Pause.

I think your wife is. Beginning. She is beginning to fall in love with me. On the brink...of doing so. The trouble is, I have rivals. Because everyone here has fallen in love with your wife. (Pinter 1984, p. 48-49).

Finally, the aggressor has reached a level where he can dictate his victims' feelings.

Agony

Pinter extracts a statement on the stage together with the oath that the defendant is forced to swear before the trial. It is supposed to bring out the confession against

the law. Although Nicolas gets the authority from the government, he knows the human reality and hesitates to torture the civilized people. At this juncture, Nicolas struggles against the “super-power of the sovereign” and “the infra-power of acquired and tolerated illegalities” (Kelly 1994).

Nicolas, who runs the threatening state institution, has brought in a family for questioning. Victor, presumably a dissident intellectual, is tortured and his wife Gila is repeatedly raped. Nicolas takes more authority and exhibits power. The fate of Victor’s seven-year-old son Nicky, whom Nicolas makes him sit on his knee, is ambiguous until the final line of the play. This play portrays tortured victims and their inability to protect those whom they love. Once again, Pinter’s play shows Pinter’s underlying obsession with the Holocaust, alluding to the many victims who were tortured and raped for pleasure. The family in this play has been torn apart in the same way that Jewish families were separated during the Holocaust.

Nicolas has used the most effective method of torture as revealed in the following passage when he talks to Victor:

Nicolas: What about you? Do you love death? Not necessarily your own. Others. The death of others. Do you love the death of others, or at any rate, do you love the death of others as much as I do? (Pinter 1984, p. 45).

Nicolas uses Victor’s fear of death and his apprehension of losing his family to torture him. This is similar to the Nazi’s technique; they would rather use the threat of violence, than violence itself. The Nazis understood the basic needs and their imagination. Nicolas used this method to torture Victor.

Victor: Kill me.

Nicolas: What?

Victor: Kill me (Pinter 1984, p. 51).

The utterance ‘kill me’ does not usually come very quickly from the heart of a human being. But Victor says this; because he buries everything in his mind. He does not heed to unnecessary words; he never bothers about these words in front of Nicolas. As he hears these words, his mind wanders hither and thither. At this juncture, Victor does not give up the excellence of civilized people’s lives. He contemplates on Nicolas’ statement. Thus, Pinter depicts the agony of the civilized in the hands of the totalitarians.

It is important to note that Pinter’s representation of Nicolas uses ambiguous dialogues. Nicolas gets no pleasure from his role as much as he appears to; he drinks whiskey every five minutes and there is also a sense of alienation in his character. He serves the state because he has no one else; his role as a torturer consumes his life. Nicolas and Victor share the drinks at the end of the play, it appears as though it is a moment that might equalize the power disparity between the two men, but that is not possible. Nicolas says to Victor that he is free to leave, but his wife is going to remain there longer for the men’s pleasure and that his son

is dead. Victor's inability to respond to Nicolas and save his wife and son clearly indicates his powerlessness.

The last line of the play is intended to inflict a similar pain in the audience that the millions of people lived with everyday during the Holocaust. Victor informs that he and his wife will be freed and he asks about his young son, to which Nicolas replies and ends the play. "Your son? Oh don't worry about him. He was a little prick" (Pinter 1984, p. 79). Nicky is the only character who says how he feels and what he thinks; he possesses a childlike innocence that allows him to express himself, whereas his parents know enough not to speak their minds. In the end, it is the child's innocence that kills Nicky. His honesty allows Nicolas to consider him a 'little prick' and therefore, decides that he should not live. Nicolas' power to determine who should live and who should not live reflects the power that the Nazis held over the people; they often killed members of one family only because they had the power to. Nicolas discovered the ultimate means of torture and inflicting pain upon others, to kill one's offspring.

Victor's son is a product of himself and his wife; he is the one thing that they had created together, and according to Nicolas he was a little prick. Therefore, their offspring is not considered fit to live. Similarly, Hitler wanted to end the Jewish race. He wanted to kill the future of the Jewish race in the same manner that Nicolas ends the future of both Victor and Gila. It is interesting to note that children rarely appear in Pinter's plays and when they do, they are murdered at the end. In general, children represent the future, the hope and possibility of opportunity, and Pinter's lack of child characters suggests a lack of hope in the future. Nicolas not only murders Victor and Gila's offspring, but also ends their prospect of future life. With one simple action, Victor and Nicolas become the same person. Whether they are following the orders or perhaps even enjoying their opportunity to play god, their sins are still the same. According to Taylor-Batty (2001), "the dramatic effect of unqualified anger is inadequate for preaching to the converted. It is extremely significant, then, that Pinter does not actually close *One for the Road* simply with these final words, but with the stage direction for Victor to straighten and stare at Nicolas. There is then a 'Silence' followed by a 'Blackout'. Deposited in that protracted pause is a huge reserve of dignity, buttressed by Victor's attempt to stretch his painful body full straight in his chair".

Conclusion

One for the Road is a later play of Pinter that deals with power relations among human beings. Although various critics have discussed the theme, technique, characterization, and language of the play, it lends itself to a Foucauldian analysis of power, position and agony. The power and position of Nicolas cause agony for the less privileged family of Victor, his wife Gila and their son Nicky. Although Pinter has hinted at the violence against the Jewish race by the oppressor, the

illogical and unreasonable act of the oppressor is actually detrimental to the entire humanity. Hence, Pinter calls for a careful scrutiny of all forms of power, position and agony in *One for the Road*.

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