How Franz Kafka and Harold Pinter use Themes of Torture, Religion, and Colonization to Show how Governments Abuse Power

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Harold Pinter has often cited Franz Kafka as influential on his own writing. Both writers are interested in questions of power: Why do people believe that they have power? Why do people have power over others? How do those people lose their own power? This essay will also show how Kafka's 1919 short story "In The Penal Colony" laid the groundwork for the themes that would dominate Pinter's later works, particularly the one act plays One for the Road (1984) and Mountain Language (1988).

Goldsmith, Jaxon. 2024. "How Franz Kafka and Harold Pinter use Themes of Torture, Religion, and Colonization to Show how Governments Abuse Power," *Wings of Fire*. Volume 1. No. 2.

Franz Kafka and Harold Pinter are two of the most prolific writers of the 20th century. Both writers have mastered the ability to create nuanced characters, write layered and complex stories, and unpack themes of power and control. Their commonalities are not a mere coincidence, but rather a clear depiction of homage and appreciation for Kafka on Pinter's part. Pinter has often cited Kafka as influential on his own writing. Pinter, in his Nobel Prize speech, said "Kafka is often seen as offering a vision of a world without hope. On the contrary, I believe he offers a vision of man holding up, as best he can, against an incomprehensible world which has no interest in his survival" (Nobelprize.org, 2005). This quote beautifully describes many of the themes both writers are so interested in without addressing them directly: themes like who has the power, why do they have that power, and how do they use that power? These ideas are the main focus in both writers' stories.

Kafka's 1919 short story "In The Penal Colony" and Pinter's one act plays *One for the Road* (1984) and *Mountain Language* (1988) are each invested in the exploration of power. Why do people believe that they have power? Why do people have power over others? How do those people lose their own power? In these stories specifically, power is attained through force and kept through force. The use of torture, the suppression of culture due to colonization, and the assertion of a divine right are all used as tactics for governments to keep their control and abuse their power in these stories. This essay will also show how "In The Penal Colony" laid the groundwork for the themes that would dominate Pinter's later works.

"In The Penal Colony", in its most basic form, tells the story of a desperate officer's last hope in maintaining a penal colony's old way of government by showing a foreign traveler the torture and killing of a condemned man. The means of execution is an apparatus that inscribes the punishment of the presumed criminal into their body by a harrow of needles until they eventually, many hours later, die of their wounds.

This story's concept contains the themes that this essay aims to explore. The first of these themes is the power dynamic between The Officer and The Condemned Man, who is a depiction of

the powerless. This island was conquered by the nation of The Officer by military force. On the first page of the text, Kafka illustrates this:

> "These uniforms are really too heavy for the tropics," the Traveller said, instead of asking some questions about the apparatus, as the Officer had expected. "That's true," said the Officer. He washed the oil and grease from his dirty hands in a bucket of water standing ready, "but they mean home, and we don't want to lose our homeland." (Kafka)

This is one of the first explicit confessions of the reasons behind keeping this place colonized. In her article, "Kafka's Critique of Colonialism." Margaret Kohn explains that, "The uniform symbolizes civilization and therefore the legitimacy of the colonial project. The Officer is attached to this symbol of civilization because he is so deeply implicated in the barbarism that the colonial regime is supposed to supplant" (Kohn, 2005). Both Kafka and Kohn show that these power complexes that occur throughout this story are the direct result of colonialism, the taking of power from natives who lived there before this domination from another culture.

The Condemned Man is sentenced as a result of this colonization, and he is inherently powerless in relation to the other characters. This is shown in the first paragraph of the story, where Kafka writes, "The Condemned Man, incidentally, had an expression of such dog-like resignation that it looked as if one could set him free to roam around the slopes and would only have to whistle at the start of the execution for him to return" (Kafka). This moment not only shows the power that the officer and the colony have over The Condemned Man, but also the comparison to a dog emphasizes the dehumanization that The Condemned Man is subjected to. Kafka also enhances the power The Officer has over The Condemned Man by creating a language barrier. Kafka explains that, "The Condemned Man was also watching, but without understanding" (Kafka). There are multiple examples throughout the text that show the Condemned Man being isolated through language.. Kafka writes that The Condemned Man follows the conversation with his body because he is unable to articulate anything, so he watches to see what is happening. There are also instances where The Condemned Man is described as watching with his ears to pick up inflection to see if he is in danger.

The Officer, as a representative of The Old Commandant, has been given the power to torture. The apparatus that the colony uses to execute people connects to many different themes, one of which is power. This power is both physically and psychologically inflicted. The officer explains in painstaking detail the multi-hour process of the torture. He explains this both to The Traveler and The Condemned Man, but The Condemned Man has no idea what is being talked about because of the language barrier. The first part of this torture is physical. The entire process of the torture is absolute agony, and this torture leads to unescapable death. The last twelve hours of this person's life will end in pain and suffering. The second part of this is the psychological aspect of the torture. Along with it being utterly unbearable, the person on the receiving end of the punishment doesn't even know why they are being punished. "'What is the sentence?' the Traveller asked. 'You don't even know that?' asked the Officer in astonishment." (Kafka, translated by Johnson, 2007) The condemned person is not aware of the reason for their punishment, but they are sentenced to twelve hours of agony. The Officer further explains that, "For the first six hours the condemned man goes on living almost as before. He suffers nothing but pain" (Kafka) as his sentence is inscribed on his body with the sharp needles. But then there are an additional six hours of torture:

> "But how quiet the man becomes around the sixth hour! The most stupid of them begin to understand. It starts around the eyes and spreads out from there. A look that could tempt one to lie down under the Harrow. Nothing else happens. The man simply begins to decipher the inscription.

> He purses his lips, as if he is listening. You've seen that it's not easy to figure out the inscription with your eyes, but our man deciphers it with his wounds." (Kafka)

At the end of the story, The Traveler visits the tea house. The inscription on the tomb of The Old Commandant reads:

> Here rests the Old Commandant. His followers, who are now not permitted to have a name, buried him in this grave and erected this stone. There exists a prophecy that the Commandant will rise again after a certain number of years and from this house will lead his followers to a re-conquest of the colony. Have faith and wait! (Kafka)

Not only does The Officer inflict the torture as a means to ensure the safety of the colony and the ability to freely inflict pain for power's sake, but he is also bound by the words of The Old Commandant. The religious tones truly show themselves with the references to the feelings that the officer has about The Old Commandant. Firstly, the word Commandant is eerily similar to Commandment, as in the Ten Commandments. Secondly, The Old Commandant had precise ways to run this apparatus written in a leather-bound book. The allusions to holy text are incredibly potent, esspecially when The Officer takes immense care to make sure his hands are clean before touching the Old Commandant's documents:

> "[H]ere I am carrying"—he patted his breast pocket—"the relevant diagrams drawn by the previous Commandant."
> "Diagrams made by the Commandant himself?" asked the Traveler. "Then was he in his own person a combination of everything? Was he soldier, judge, engineer, chemist, and draftsman?"
> "He was indeed," said the Officer, nodding his head with a fixed and thoughtful expression. Then he looked at his hands, examining them. They didn't seem to him clean enough to handle the diagrams. So he went to the bucket and washed them again" (Kafka)

This phrase "soldier, judge, engineer, chemist, and draftsman" is similar to the phrase "judge, jury, and executioner," which is typically used to explain a totalitarian dictator or political leader, but among devout religious folks this also describes the job that God has. To use words so similar gives The Old Commandant a holy presence about him. The prophecy on his tomb and his scripture-like rules and guidelines for the torture suggest a religious reason for the torture along with power for power's sake.

Kafka's short story "In The Penal Colony" sets up a lot of the thematic building blocks for Pinter's play *One for the Road*. While "In The Penal Colony" shows more of the visceral and violent actions of torture, *One for the Road* leaves much of the physicality off stage and delves heavily into the manipulation of the psyche through torture. This short play follows the interrogation of three members of a family by Nicolos, a member of an unnamed powerful political force. The three members being interrogated are Victor, the main person being interrogated, Gila, his wife, and Nicky, their child.

While this play does not tackle colonialism in the same direct way that "In The Penal Colony" does, it is still very present in the undertones of the language. The theme presents itself very early with the dynamics of the two characters. The play begins with Nicolas asking for someone to "Bring him in" (Pinter, *Road*, 323). Now, perhaps this could be a normal business meeting or interview, but after a couple short monologues of erratic speech, Nicolas says, "You're probably wondering where your wife is. She's in another room" (Pinter, *Road*, 323). After this is said, it is clear that this is not an interview of good faith, but rather some kind of interrogation. There would be no other reason to mention Victor's wife if it were a normal interview. With this understanding, the immediate questions of when and why do interrogations happen start to come

to the surface. The dialogue continues with Nicolas showing his absolute power over the situation; for instance, he tells Victor that, Someone told me some of my boys kicked it [Victor's house] around a bit" (Pinter, *Road*, 326) Now questions start to brew as who Nicolas's "boys" are. Perhaps these characters are involved in the mob. Nicolas obviously is the boss of something. On the next page, Nicolas tells Victor that the man who runs the country has told him that if he "...ever comes 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, *Road*, 327). After this, one can if no assume that Nicolas is a member of the military of a powerful country.

This proves the presence of military force, but not necessarily colonialism. We learn that Victor and his family are being tortured for conspiracy against the state in the eyes of Nicolas and the government he works for. This is most illuminated in the interrogation of Victor's wife Gila and his son Nicky. In the interrogation of Nicky, Nicolas asks Nicky if he would like to be a soldier when he grows up. Nicky replies "I don't mind." Nicolas responds "You don't? Good. You like soldiers. Good. But you spat at my soldiers and you kicked them. You attacked them." Nicky replies, "Were they your soldiers?" and Nicolas ominously responds, "They are your country's soldiers." (Pinter, *Road*, 330-331) So whatever army Nicolas is part of is not fighting a foreign fight, but something domestic. After the talk with Nicky, Nicolas interrogates Gila. The interrogation starts out feeling relatively safe, not without fear and danger, but nothing imminent. This changes completely when Gila brings up her father. This, seemingly out of nowhere, makes Nicolas go berserk. He immediately attacks her for bringing her father into this conversation. Nicolas tyrannically berates her for not living up to her father's memory: "He lived. He lived. He was iron and gold. He would die, he would die, he would die, for his country, for his God. And he did die, he died, he died, for his God. You turd. To spawn such a daughter. What a fate" (Pinter, *Road*, 333). Nicolas claims that Gila's father was willing to live in and die for his country,while Gila and Victor are "intellectuals" teaching their son to kick and spit at soldiers. These clues point towards an oppressive government.

The themes of torture and religion are also present in *One for the Road*. Religion is used as a tactic in the torture that Nicolas inflicts upon Victor and Gila. With Victor, this begins on the first page of the script. In Nicolas's fourth line, Nicolas asks Victor "Which side do you think God is on?" (Pinter, *Road*, 323). He quickly answers his own question, saying "God speaks through me. I'm referring to the Old Testament God" (Pinter 324). This establishes Nicholas's erratic persona, which veers from friendly to terrifying. Before saying this bit about the Old Testament God, Nicolas says, "You may have noticed I'm the chatty type" (Pinter, *Road*, 323). Nicholas repeatedly claims that God is against Victor. Not only is God against Victor, but he speaks through Nicolas as if he is a priest. Nicolas also claims that he and his group are fighting for God. God even believes that the actions that they are committing against Victor are just. One of the last things that Nicolas tells Victor is that they are in "the business… to keep the world clean for God" (Pinter, *Road*, 336).

Gila also gets berated about God in the section where Nicolas yells at her about her father, who "would die, for his country, for his God." (Pinter, *Road*, 333). Here, too, Nicolas is weaponizing God. Nicolas's supposed love for God causes him to interpret Gila's negative opinion of her father as a negative opinion of God, the Father. This is all the reason Nicolas needs to unload a slew of insults and disgusting language at a defenseless person.

While "In the Penal Colony" and *One for the Road* are not carbon copies of one another, they share similar thematic elements. Both stories deal with a dominating political force inflicting torture over marginalized groups in the name of a God-like figure. Both the Old Commandant and Nicolas have large numbers of devout followers that will inflict torture upon others, and both men use torture as a means of controlling and retaining power.

Pinter's play *Mountain Language* also has very strong thematic similarities to "In the Penal

Colony." Both stories explore the occupation of a foreign land by a powerful government. Both stories explore the consequences of that occupation on the native people, which in *Mountain Language* are the Mountain People. But these stories differ in their focal point. *Mountain Language* shows the effects of colonial occupation on the Mountain People while "In the Penal Colony" only alludes to it. Nevertheless, the similarities between those two pieces are stark and interesting.

In an essay about these two plays, Marc Silverstein notes that *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* "have been greeted by reviewers as signaling a shift in Pinter's writing from what Martin Esslin terms 'the highly private world of his [earlier] plays' to a concern with charting the more public terrain of the political arena" (Silverstein 422). Both of these plays are incredibly overt in their political messaging. In all of Pinter's work prior to these pieces, the idea of a "highly private world" was incredibly important. That was the mystery of Pinter. Absurdity and a vague sense of menace was the backbone of the messaging. Plays like *The Dumbwaiter*, *The Room*, *Betrayal*, and *The Caretaker*, were each invested in telling the stories of power, control, religion, and occupation in their own ways. But they were all done with a lack of specificity that led to the possibility of ambiguous interpretations. But *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* remove that ambiguity. The depth and complexity of them are still rich, but the message slaps the reader in the face the same way "In the Penal Colony" does.

Mountain Language makes it very clear that we are talking directly about a military occupation. Like "In the Penal Colony," we have an officer character as well as a sergeant character. This sets us up for a hostile power dynamic between the military and the Mountain People. Pinter has the Sergeant use a classic torture technique, repeating questions very brashly to the character without power. *Mountain Language* begins with the Sergeant asking "Name?" (Pinter, *Mountain*, 341). After the Young Woman answers "We've given our names" the Sergeant asks the exact same question again and receives the exact same response. If not for the Officer cutting in to tell the Sergeant to "Stop this shit" (Pinter, *Mountain*, 341), who knows how many more times this cycle would have continued? Given Pinter's previous work, it probably would have ended horribly.

The other incredibly important part of this interaction is who is speaking back to these two military men. The Young Woman is a character who doesn't "speak the Mountain language" (Pinter, *Mountain*, 343). This is important because the military has forbidden the Mountain language from being spoken. The fact that they are interacting with someone who is linguistically on par with them is a threat to them. They can't resort to their tactics of overpowering her through language, so they have to find something else to silence the Young Woman. Both the Officer and Sergeant turn back to the matter of finding out why the Elderly Woman's hand is bleeding. The Young Woman interjects by saying that a doberman pinscher bit the woman's hand. The Officer takes this as an opportunity to flex his power. The Officer then continues this repetition of questions to assert power by asking *which* dog bit the Elderly Woman; he asks "which one?" and "what was his name?" (Pinter, *Mountain*, 342). This is an impossible question to answer, but this does not stop The Officer from abusing his power and going on a tirade about how if someone can produce the name of this particular dog he will "have that dog shot" (Pinter, *Mountain*, 342). They next ask for complaints from anyone, and of course, The Young Woman rightfully protests that they have been waiting for hours and that the Elderly Woman still has not received treatment for the dog bite. This is the last straw for the military men:

> SERGEANT. Your husbands, your sons, your fathers, these men you have been waiting to see, are shithouses. They are enemies of the state. They are shithouses.
> *The Officer steps toward the Women.*
> OFFICER. Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. It is not permitted. Do you understand? You may not speak it. It is outlawed.

> You may only speak the language of the capital. (Pinter, *Mountain*, 343).

With the dynamics of power set, scenes two and three of *Mountain Language* become far more clear on a linguistic level. The beginning of the scene finds the Elderly Woman being yelled at by the Guard for not being able to speak the language of the capital. The Guard gets very angry at this, and tries to get the Prisoner to convey to the Elderly Woman that she must speak in the appropriate language. The Prisoner too needs to be very clear and correct about his speech as well. The Prisoner corrects himself, first saying "She can't speak it" and then "She doesn't speak it" (Pinter, *Mountain*, 345). This interaction then is followed by more aggression by the Guard, and more attempts to calm the Guard from the Prisoner. This is eventually interrupted by the Prisoner. After being told that the Guard has "a wife and three kids," the Prisoner replies that he also has "a wife and three kids" (Pinter, *Mountain*, 346). But the Prisoner and Guard both understand that this reply is a slip up by the Prisoner; he has implied that he and the Guard have something in common. The Guard capitalizes on the opportunity to exert his power. He calls in the Sergeant saying he has "a joker here" (Pinter, *Mountain*, 346). In scene three it is shown that the Prisoner has been sent to a dark room. Given what we know from other Pinter plays, including *One for the Road*, it can be concluded that the Prisoner is going to be tortured. Whether it is psychological, physical, or sexual torture, it is bad enough to make the Hooded Man fall to the ground, incredibly injured. The seriousness of the effects can be deduced because the Young Woman, within seconds of seeing this, offers her body sexually to the guards to make sure that the Hooded Man is okay. This is a tactic that we have also seen in *One for the Road*—the sexual exploitation of women by those in power to inflict pain upon the vulnerable.

Pinter has always written political work. His plays often focus on power: who has the power, and why they have that power. You can also see those questions asked and answered in Kafka's writing. These are skills that both writers perfect: the ability to dynamically write stories where characters battle for power and battle the systems of power. "In the Penal Colony" by Kafka sets up lots of the thematic elements that Pinter makes his own in his two late plays *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*. Pinter shows the perspectives of those in power, and those without power, in both of these pieces. Pinter is inspired by Kafka's ability to create stories about people fighting back the best they can against systems created to discourage that fight. By showing and condemning torture, both physical and psychological, well as the cultural annihilation of language and being, Pinter takes a stand against those abusing power.

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