

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v3i1.306

## An Althusserian Reading of Harold Pinter's *One for the Road*

Merve AYDOĐDU<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Louis Althusser in his seminal essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1970) discusses the ways through which a State dominates/subjugates its subjects by means of Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses, the effects of which are traceable in Harold Pinter's 1984-play *One for the Road*. Within this scope, this paper seeks to examine Pinter's one-act play from an Althusserian point of view with a view to demonstrating the manipulative influence of ISAs and SA on the creation of subjects who would serve for the State.

**Keywords:** Althusser, Harold Pinter, Ideological State Apparatuses.

Harold Pinter, one of the most notable literary figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a 2005 Nobel Prize-winning playwright, screenwriter, director, actor and a political activist. Having briefly studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Pinter worked as a professional actor touring Britain and Ireland under the stage name David Baron from 1949 until 1959. Meanwhile, he embarked on his writing career. Much as his early plays were influenced by

---

\* Hacettepe Üniversitesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı, 2005. ODTÜ, Yabancı Diller Eğitimi Bölümü, Yüksek Lisans 2013 Mezunlu.

the theatre of the absurd reformulated with his distinctive *Pinteresque* style, Pinter's concerns as a political activist soon led him to write political plays since his bleak first-hand experiences of war and devastation during World War II left an irrevocable impression on him (Hager 380). In his openly political works he penned since the mid-1980s in his later career, Pinter pointed to the reality of political oppression, torture and violence (Aragay 289). In his Nobel Prize speech, having the aforementioned anxieties in mind, he described the politicians as those who are more interested in power rather than truth:

Political language, as used by politicians, does not venture into any of this territory since the majority of politicians, on the evidence available to us, are interested not in truth but in power and in the maintenance of that power. To maintain that power it is essential that people remain in ignorance, that they live in ignorance of the truth, even the truth of their own lives. What surrounds us therefore is a vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed. (Hern and Pinter 3)

In the same vein, Pinter was preoccupied with the themes of “dominance, control, exploitation, subjugation and victimization” (Innes 332), thus, the idea of power played an important role in shaping the structure of his dramatic works. Billington defines “Pinter’s vision of human relationships as a quest for dominance and control” (56) and *One for the Road* (1984) can be considered as a model of power structure in which the oppressor-the oppressed dichotomy is in the foreground. It is a one-act political play about the interrogation of three characters who (seem to) dissent from the government in power. The political nature of the play, in which the abuse of power, authority and human rights is alarming, renders it possible to examine *One for the Road* from an Althusserian point of view. The play lays bare ideology and ideological state apparatuses while showing what happens to the individuals who refuse to become *subjects* of ideology. Thus, this study seeks to analyse *One for the Road* based on Althusser’s formulation of ideology and its working mechanisms.

Louis Althusser in his seminal essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1970) discusses the ways by which a State dominates its subjects through Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses and he defines ideology as “a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (56). According to him, what is represented in ideology is not the

system of real relationships between the individuals but the imaginary ones which they have taken for granted as real (57). That is, for Althusser, while ideology fabricates an imaginary world, the individuals regard it as real. What is more, “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects” (58). It works “*by the category of subject and its functioning*” (58). The word *category* already points to the constructedness of subjects and it is through ideology that individuals are constituted as subjects (Newton 53). It transforms individuals into subjects while creating the illusion that they are autonomous: therefore, in Althusser’s view, ideology not only creates imaginary relationships between subjects but it also provides them with an imaginary idea of themselves as being free individuals.

Althusser presents two agents –two paradigms of the State Superstructure- for the reproduction of ideology and its subjects: Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatus (SA). ISAs include the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the trade-union ISA, the communication ISA and the cultural ISA such as Literature, the Arts and sports (54-5) while SA contains the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, and the Prisons (54). Ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. So, it has a material existence (57-8) and ISAs and SA are interdependent to fulfil their aim. Althusser further emphasizes an essential difference between the two agents: Repressive State Apparatus functions by *violence* whereas Ideological State Apparatuses function by *ideology* (55). Besides, the former one mainly belongs to the *public* domain while the latter ones such as Churches, Parties, newspapers, schools work on the *private* sphere (55). However, it is unimportant whether they function in either of these places, because, what is crucial is that these apparatuses, whether it is Ideological or Repressive, function both by violence and by ideology interchangeably (55). The slight difference between the two is that while ISAs primarily function by ideology and secondarily by repression, SA functions predominantly by repression concurrently making use of ideology. In this context, there is neither such thing as a purely ideological apparatus nor a purely repressive one (55-6). For instance, the Police, within the category of SA, basically functions by repression and violence while its driving force is ideology acting with the aim of ensuring its cohesion and reproduction (56).

Within the aforesaid framework, it is possible to analyse Pinter’s *One for the Road* as the representation of one of the agents of Repressive State Apparatus –the Prison or the Army.

It demonstrates the working mechanism of SA –violence- by which the individuals are subjugated. In the play, Nicolas “*mid 40s*” (Pinter 222) serves as the instrument of SA because he guarantees that it functions properly. As Pinter relates in an interview, Nicolas is aware of his power and he does not hesitate to use this power to victimize the detainees:

He has all the power within those walls. He knows this is the case, he believes that it is right, for him, to possess this power, because as far as he’s concerned, he’s acting for his country legitimately and properly. When he refers to the country’s values, those are his values. And because of those values, he will kill; allow rape, everything he can think of. And torture . . . In order to protect the realm, anything is justified. (Hern and Pinter 16-7)

Pinter’s remark on his character serves as an illustrative introduction for the rest of this paper. The above-quotation epitomizes Althusser’s arguments such as the interpellation of individuals as subjects, how these subjects function within certain ideology, how voluntarily - yet unconsciously- they subserve for the progression of ideology by means of its material practices and how these subjects think of themselves autonomous entities despite being subjected to ideology. Then, it is possible to express what has just been stated within Althusser’s own words: ideology functions in a quadruple system in which individuals are interpellated as subjects, they accept their subjection to the Subject, the subjects mutually recognize each other and completely believe that everything is under their control (61). The key arguments of the system, which constitutes the subject matter of the present analysis, also serve as the outline for the ideas to be discussed soon.

The play begins with Nicolas’s order “bring him in” (223) upon which 30-year-old Victor, “*bruised and with clothes torn, slowly walks in*” (223). His appearance is indicative of his recent torture by the soldiers: violence materializes itself with torn clothes, bruised body. Even from the very beginning, the audience is made aware that “the State Apparatus in question functions by violence” (Althusser 54). Through the characterization of Nicolas, Pinter, from the very beginning, highlights Althusser’s idea of the “imaginary relation” of the individuals to their “real conditions of existence.” Ideology recruits subjects among individuals; it hails concrete individuals as concrete subjects (60). Nicolas is one such figure

who is no more than a concrete subject although he thinks himself of a free, autonomous, concrete individual capable of behaving however he wishes:

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. . . . I can do absolutely anything I like.  
(223)

Purporting that he “run[s] the place” (225), Nicolas regards himself a figure of authority, an autonomous individual free to do whatever he wants though his condition is mere illusion because he can be free so long as he conforms to ideology or he can *feel* free only if he obeys the command of ideology. Nicolas has to be a subject; he has to be subjected to the Subject (Adams and Searle 1306) since it is the only way ideology recognizes him. He has no choice but to be enslaved by the Subject: “*the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject. . . . There are no subjects except by and for their subjection* (Althusser 62). Nicolas, on the other hand, is entirely unaware that he is a subject under a higher authority. He lives in an illusion that he has freedom with “a free subjectivity” (Althusser 61) or being “a centre of initiatives” (61) but, in fact, he misrecognizes himself because “every subject endowed with a consciousness and believing in the ideas that his consciousness inspires in him . . . inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice” (Adams and Searle 1301-2). Nicolas, in this context, does not realize that he has already been interpellated as a subject. Indeed, the moment when he is called “Nic” (231) he is put in a subject position; he is “appointed as a subject in and by the specific ideological configuration” (Adams and Searle 1305) yet his situation indicates how he is deluded by actually-nonexistent free will.

The idea that individuals are interpellated as free subjects so that they can freely submit to the orders of the Subject can also be exemplified by the soldiers’ behaviour when they arrest the family. There are no subjects except for their subjection and the soldiers readily accept their position. They behave in accordance with what ideology prescribes them to do:

Someone told me some of my boys kicked it around a bit. Pissed on  
the rugs, that sort of thing. I wish they wouldn't do that. I do really.  
But you know what it's like –they have such responsibilities- and they

feel them- they are constantly present –day and night- these responsibilities- and so, sometimes, they piss on a few rugs. (228)

Althusser states that all people, even before they are born, are *always already* subjects (59). Ideology precedes them; therefore, it is impossible to be outside of it. By the same token, it demands the interpellation of individuals as subjects who ‘work by themselves’ in various cases for the perpetuation of its dominance, who participate in the material practices of ideology. Those who work all right *by themselves*, who are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of ISAs, who *recognize* the existing state of affairs as being really true without considering otherwise are the “good subjects” while the ones who provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the Repressive State Apparatus are accounted “bad subjects” (61). The soldiers, in this case, are “good subjects” because they practise what they are conditioned to do without questioning. Amen- ‘*So be it.*’ They cannot think of an *otherwise* situation. They are “[Nicolas’s] boys” (228) who reciprocally recognize subjects and the Subject. They work by themselves freely accepting ideology and their positions as subjects. What they experience then is merely a false freedom: what they do seem natural and consciously-chosen to them, because, for Althusser, they have already internalized the precepts of ideology ever since they are born. Hence, in reality, the only freedom is to choose submission.

In accordance with the distinction between “good” and “bad” subjects, Victor is under custody because, as Nicolas states, “[he doesn’t] believe in a guiding light” (227) contrary to the soldiers and him. Nicolas claims to have seen this guiding light in which he ardently believes:

I have never been more moved, in the whole of my life, as when –only the other day, last Friday, I believe- 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! (232)

The political gathering Nicolas mentions is remindful of Althusser’s idea that ideology interpellates individuals in the name of a Unique and Absolute Subject. The invisible Subject, whose presence is constitutive of ideology and ensures its functioning, occupies the unique place of the Centre and interpellates infinite number of individuals into subjects. Ideology

creates an illusion and subjects are *subjected* to believe its prescriptions. Althusser further states that “the individual in question participate[s] in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which ‘depend’ the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject” (Adams and Searle 1301). Then, the subject nourishes the existence of the Subject. Althusser repeatedly emphasizes that the subjects suppose that they have chosen what they believe in freely while ideology, which is always hidden, is at work shaping their ideas. To quote from Quigley:

In *One for the Road*, Nicolas, the interrogator, derives some of his sense of legitimacy and authority from his conviction that he speaks for a national consensus. Citing his country’s leader, he portrays himself as one acting on behalf of a unified group against a lone dissenter. . . . The repeated phrase ‘I am not alone’ mobilizes the claims to legitimacy of the voice and of the actions it endorses. (10)

Nicolas tries to create a bond of comradeship in order to justify his actions. Thus, for him, Victor is a bad subject because he does not believe in what Nicolas holds on to. He believes in an illusion that they are all one in power sharing a common heritage yet Victor does not credit such an illusion, the reason why he becomes a threat to the functioning of ideology. Victor is charged with being “a man of the highest intelligence” (Pinter 224) who does not yield to ideology.

Ideology asks for the “mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects’ recognition of each other, and finally the subject’s recognition of himself” (Althusser 61). Within this framework, it is inevitable that Victor is labelled as a “bad subject” because he neither recognizes one of the subjects nor the Subject.

Are you saying you don’t respect me? . . . I’ve heard so much about you. I’m terribly pleased to meet you. . . . Firstly because I’ve heard so much about you. Secondly because if you don’t respect me you’re unique. Everyone else knows the voice of God speaks through me.  
(226-7)

“The interpellation of individuals as subjects presupposes the ‘existence’ of a Unique and central Other Subject” (Adams and Searle 1305) and Nicolas has been devoted to such an

unknown Subject whose absent presence dominates *the Prison*. Considering Victor unique now that he is the only who does not respect him, Nicholas plays God there. What is ironic, however, is that he embarks on the role of subjects and the Subject simultaneously when he remarks that God is speaking through him. Yet the fact that he assumes himself as the mediator between God and his subjects is suggestive of his unconscious interpellation as a subject: Nicolas's struggle to prove his omnipotence is vain because, despite being unaware, "he is a subject, a subject of God, a subject subjected to God, a subject through the Subject and subjected to the Subject." He is merely an interlocutor between subjects and the Subject. He is the Subject's *mirror*, his *reflection* (1306). He postulates himself to be the spokesperson for the Subject and places himself above the other subjects yet he is completely blind to the reality that he is an ordinary subject merely employed for the reproduction and maintenance of ideology. Nicolas seeks to subjugate Victor while he is unwittingly subjugated by ideology.

In *One for the Road*, "bad subjects" are disciplined through violence serving as the main agent of SA to repress the plurality of voices, to control the individuals, and to teach them how to become good subjects. The violence is not limited to the physical one, though. SA benefits from psychological and physical violence whose educative power it has trust in. Nicolas, through his continuous remarks about his wife Gila, tries to disturb Victor mentally:

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. . . . I have rivals. Because everyone here has fallen in love with your wife. (231)

Just as her husband, Gila is exposed to physical and psychological maltreatment under arrest. She is persecuted and possibly raped by the soldiers several times. "*Her clothes are torn, she is bruised*" (237). As well as sexual harassment, she has to endure Nicolas's verbal torture: "Have they been raping you? . . . How many times? . . . How many times have you been raped?" (243). Gila is ill-treated because she is not a good subject, either. She is responsible for the *proper* education of her son Nicky but, in terms of what ideology (and Nicolas) holds, she has been unable to raise him as a good subject.

Your son is . . . seven. 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 encouraged him to spit, to strike soldiers of honour, soldiers of God. (244)

Gila neither as a mother nor as a daughter manages to fulfil the requirements of ideology. She cannot school Nicky in accordance with what ideology demands nor can she follow her father's path. Nicolas reminds Gila of him who seems to have been in a powerful position in the State. Thereby, he again points to the distinction 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)

In his attempt to educate Gila, Nicolas presents an exemplary figure, a "good subject" who worked for the well-being of his country, which she and Victor failed. Gila's father –like the soldiers, Nicolas and like whom he calls patriots- believed in the Subject, served for the reproduction of its ideology and became a good citizen "good subject" of his country. Unfortunately, however, even seven-year-old Nicky fails to be a "good subject" now that he "spat at [Nicolas's] soldiers and [he] kicked them" and that "[he] didn't like [his] country's soldiers" (236). Soon, indeed, he is killed by them because he is uneducable to be a good subject. He is murdered because he has protested against the subjects of ideology. He should have been raised as an obedient subject-slave to ideology, respecting, reproducing and participating in its practices but "he was a little prick" (247).

Ideology necessitates homogenization, and, in case someone goes against it, Repressive State Apparatus employs its control mechanism to subjugate individuals. Ideology desires to silence any oppositional voice. That is, homogeneity is impelled upon individuals to create subjects out of them. In this sense, none of the characters in *One for the Road* can be "good subjects" as they destroy the (so-called) harmony. They pose a threat/challenge to the

integrity/permanence of ideology. Thus, Nicolas exerts power over Victor, Gila and Nicky to silence them, who, in return, are punished by one of the agents of ideology –violence.

Pinter's deliberate use of italics for the words *think* and *live* once more underlines Althusser's definition of ideology and how it functions, both of which have been stated at the very beginning of this paper: Gila's father *lived* as a subject in an imaginary world which he took it real while the family *thought* and rejected *subjectivization*.

Nicolas punishes the family as he *chooses* to see them guilty although he cannot see with his own eyes but through the lenses ideology has inserted into him. Likewise, he frees Victor and Gila only when their education is presumably completed, that is, when they become the subjects of ideology.

You can leave. We'll meet again, I hope. I trust we will always remain friends. Go out. Enjoy life. Be good. (246)

Nicolas sets them free that but it is implied that the couple will be under surveillance. The Subject keeps its subjects under constant surveillance through its other subjects in case they attempt to go against the overwhelming ideology, which might harm the homogeneity in the society. Having resisted the authority of ideology, Victor and Gila become the targets of that authority's gaze.

In sum, *One for the Road*, being a highly political play, reveals how ideology works in society and how it (threatens to) destroy[s] the individuals unless they accept to be its subjects. Pinter demystifies ideology, its material existence and its working mechanisms because his anger "is directed vitriolically against the System" (Cohn 55). Repressive State Apparatus presents one of its categories –the Prison- and the audience is faced with how it operates by violence. The play also exhibits how individuals are shaped within ideology. Nicolas, as the representative of the ideal "good subject" of ideology, is situated in an irrevocably subject position blinded by what he has been subjected to with "the corresponding attitudes, inscribed in ritual practices 'according to the correct principles'" (Adams and Searle 1301). Being disposed to torture without remorse, he never questions the Subject and its authority. And, his perverted mental motivation is striking: "Death. Death. Death. Death. As has been noted by *the most respected authorities*, it is beautiful" [italics mine] (Pinter 229).

## References

- Adams, Hazard and Leroy Searle. (2005). *Critical Theory Since Plato*. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." By Louis Althusser. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. 1297-1308. PDF File.
- Althusser, Louis. (1988). *Ideology and the State*." *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. K. M. Newton. London: MacMillan. 54-62. Print.
- Aragay, Mireia. (2009). *Pinter, Politics and Postmodernism (2)*. *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*. Ed. Peter Raby. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York: Cambridge UP. 283-96.
- Billington, Michael. (2007). *Harold Pinter*. London: Faber and Faber. *Google Book Search*. Web. 10 December 2013.
- Cohn, Ruby. (1962). *The World of Harold Pinter*. *The Tulane Drama Review*, 6.3 (1962): 55-68. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 December 2013.
- Innes, C. D. (2002). *Modern British Drama: the Twentieth Century*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. PDF File.
- Hager, Alan ed. (2009). *Encyclopedia of British Writers, 1800 to the Present: 20th Century and Beyond*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York: InfoBase P. PDF File.
- Hern, Nicholas and Harold Pinter. (1984). *One for the Road and An Interview on the Play and Its Politics*. London: Methuen. *Google Book Search*. Web. 08 December 2013.
- Newton, K. M. ed. (1988). *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory A Reader*. London: MacMillan. PDF File.
- Pinter, Harold. (1988). *Plays Four*. London: Faber. Print.
- Quigley, Austin. (2009). *Pinter, Politics and Postmodernism (1)*. *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*. Ed. Peter Raby. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York: Cambridge UP. 7-26. Print.