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The Silent Spectacle of Power: Biopolitics, Bare Life, and the Cultivation of Ethical Consciousness in Harold Pinter's One for the Road

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examines how Harold Pinter's One for the Road (1984) stages Agambenian concepts of biopolitics, bare life, and the state of exception to cultivate ethical consciousness. It investigates the depiction of homo sacer through Victor, Gila, and Nicky, the relationship between state control and autonomy, and the interrogation chamber as a space of exception, arguing that the play educates audiences about the fragility of human rights.

Methods: Employing a qualitative, interpretive methodology, the study combines close reading with Agambenian political philosophy. Primary sources include the play and Agamben's Homo Sacer and State of Exception, supplemented by secondary scholarship on Pinter's political drama, the Turkish context, and the ethics of witnessing.

Results: The analysis demonstrates that the play reduces its victims to bare life through biopolitical control, encompassing torture, sexual humiliation, and family destruction. Nicolas embodies the sovereign operating beyond law in a permanent state of exception. The dramatic structure compels the audience to confront the fragility of legal protections and recognize their ethical obligations as witnesses to state violence.

Conclusions: One for the Road functions as a theatrical laboratory that cultivates ethical consciousness by forcing spectators to witness bare life. The play reveals the state of exception as a present possibility, constituting a vital resource for educating citizens about state oppression and the necessity of ethical engagement.

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Introduction

Harold Pinter's One for the Road (1984) occupies a pivotal position in the playwright's career, marking his transition from the oblique menaces of his early "comedies of menace" to the explicit political engagement of his later work. As Özmen Akdoğan (2016) observes, Pinter "was almost always interested in national and international politics," and his political plays "criticise the social reality of his time implicitly by presenting problematic settings of inequality, censorship and torture" (p. 331). The play was written in direct response to Pinter's outrage at the torture of Turkish academics following the 1980 military coup. In an interview, Pinter recounted how, after meeting two people who had no idea "what Turkish military prisons were like and about torture in Turkey," he "came back immediately, sat down and, it's true, out of rage started to write One for the Road" (Hern, 1985, pp. 12–14). The following year, Pinter visited Turkey with Arthur Miller "to investigate allegations of the torture and persecution of Turkish writers" (Wikipedia, 2005).

The play dramatizes the encounter between an unnamed state official, Nicolas, and a family of dissidents, Victor, his wife Gila, and their seven-year-old son Nicky, who are subjected to interrogation, humiliation, and violence in an unnamed interrogation chamber. The play's universality, achieved through its refusal to specify a particular nation or historical moment, allows it to function as a parabolic indictment of all totalitarian regimes and a meditation on the nature of sovereign power itself. As Amin and Muhammed (2024) note, the play "takes place in an unnamed country and historical period to preserve its universality" while portraying "the torture and violence practised by totalitarian regimes against political dissidents" (p. 556).

The theoretical framework most suited to illuminating the play's political and ethical dimensions is that of Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's philosophy of biopolitics, developed across Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1998) and State of Exception (2005), provides a vocabulary for understanding how modern states exercise power not merely over territory or law but over life itself. Central to this framework is the concept of the state of exception, a condition in which the normal legal order is suspended, and the sovereign operates beyond the constraints of law. As Owens (2017) notes, Pinter's political plays "frequently take place during sociopolitical states of exception, during which foundational, constitutive juridico-legislative processes and protections are suspended precisely in order to safeguard their continuity and efficacy" (p. 29). Within this suspended juridical zone, individuals can be reduced to "bare life" (nuda vita), stripped of political

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and legal personhood and exposed to arbitrary violence. This figure is the homo sacer, the one who can be killed without it constituting murder (Agamben, 1998, p. 71). As Agamben argues, the production of bare life is not an aberration but the hidden foundation of sovereign power itself: "the inclusion of bare life in the political sphere constitutes the original, if concealed, nucleus of sovereign power" (Agamben, 1998, p. 6).

Existing scholarship on One for the Road has productively engaged with Agamben's concepts. Ates (2019) analyzes the play through the lens of the state of exception and bare life, arguing that it dramatizes how sovereignty operates through the suspension of law. Owens (2017) explores the play's theatricalization of the state of exception itself, arguing that Pinter "appears to relegate theater itself to a state of exception, an impossible, paradoxical representational space in which what is said is always immediately consumed and negated by the representational practices of live theater" (p. 29). Özmen Akdoğan (2016) situates the play within the tradition of dystopian drama, arguing that Pinter uses dystopian elements to critique the actual political conditions of Turkey in the 1980s and Britain in the 1990s. Amin and Muhammed (2024) examine violence as a coercive tool for establishing state control, drawing on Johan Galtung's theory of violence to analyze how "tyrannical systems dehumanise and debase noncomplying citizens using political ideology as an excuse so that imprisoning and torturing them becomes justifiable" (p. 556). Quigley (2001) observes that in the play "what is dramatised is not the physical torture, murder and rape so frequently referred to in critical discussion, but the processes of self-justification they promote and the differing consequences for the oppressors and the oppressed of their limited persuasiveness" (p. 10).

However, what remains underexplored is the question of how the play's dramatic form, its staging, its language, its ambiguities, and its affective impact, functions to cultivate ethical consciousness in the audience. How does witnessing the reduction of Victor, Gila, and Nicky to bare life transform the spectator's understanding of human rights, state power, and their own ethical responsibilities? This question is particularly urgent given the play's pedagogical potential. As Roberts (2021) argues, "teaching the work of Harold Pinter can manifest Freire's commitment to education as a practice of freedom, whereby individuals enter into dialogue with one another in order to identify, discuss, and overcome oppression and exploitation" (p. 121). Pinter's political plays, Roberts contends, "encourage students and teachers alike to develop the critical

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consciousness necessary to transform oppressive socioeconomic structures and the political institutions that reinforce them" (p. 121). This article extends Roberts's pedagogical insight to argue that One for the Road itself functions as a theatrical pedagogy, a dramatic apparatus that cultivates ethical consciousness through the experience of witnessing bare life.

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology combining close reading of the play with Agambenian political philosophy and secondary scholarship on Pinter's political drama. Primary sources include the play text and Agamben's Homo Sacer and State of Exception. Secondary sources include scholarship on Pinter's dystopian drama, the Turkish context of the play's composition, the ethics of witnessing, and the pedagogical dimensions of Pinter's political theatre. The analysis proceeds through a close reading of the play's key scenes, the interrogation of Victor, the questioning of Gila, the encounter with Nicky, and the final exchange between Nicolas and Victor, examining how each scene stages the production of bare life and solicits the audience's ethical response. The study is guided by four research questions:

How does One for the Road depict bare life and the figure of homo sacer, and in what ways does this dehumanized condition, experienced by Victor, Gila, and Nicky, cultivate the reader's critical awareness of the fragility of human rights and the mechanisms of sovereign power?

How does Agamben's concept of biopolitics illuminate the relationship between individual autonomy and state control in One for the Road, especially through torture, sexuality, family governance, and the management of biological life, and what does this reveal about the ethical responsibilities of citizens in surveillance states?

What role does violence, torture, rape threats, humiliation, and psychological terror, play as a mechanism of sovereign power in One for the Road, and how does analyzing this violence foster a deeper critical understanding of the processes that produce bare life and enable totalitarian governance?

How does the interrogation chamber in One for the Road function as an explicit space of exception that challenges the boundaries of law, morality, and human dignity, and how does this dramatic representation cultivate critical reflection on the fragility of legal protections and the ethical obligations of witnesses to state violence?

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Material and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive literary methodology that combines close textual analysis with Giorgio Agamben's political philosophy of biopolitics, bare life, and the state of exception. The primary corpus comprises Harold Pinter's 1984 play *One for the Road* and Agamben's foundational theoretical texts, notably *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and *State of Exception* (2005). To contextualize the textual and political dimensions of the play, the primary material is supported by secondary scholarship on Pinter's political drama, the historical backdrop of state violence and torture (including the post-1980 Turkish military coup context), the ethics of witnessing, and the pedagogical capacity of theater.

The analytical procedure proceeds through a structured close reading of key dramatic episodes: Victor's interrogation and physical mutilation, Gila's subjection to psychological and sexualized humiliation, Nicky's symbolic criminalization, and the final power dynamic between Nicolas and Victor. Rather than employing empirical audience metrics, the study investigates the internal formal, linguistic, and spatial mechanisms of the text—specifically examining the interrogation chamber as a topological state of exception—to evaluate how Pinter's dramatic structure positions spectators and readers as ethical witnesses to sovereign violence and bare life.

Results

Bare Life and the Figure of Homo Sacer

Pinter's One for the Road stages the production of bare life with an unflinching clarity that compels the audience to confront the fragility of human rights under conditions of absolute sovereignty. Victor, Gila, and Nicky are systematically reduced to homines sacri, beings whose political and legal personhood has been stripped away, leaving only biological existence exposed to arbitrary violence. Victor, the intellectual dissident, is interrogated for an unnamed crime, his tongue mutilated offstage, his body broken; when asked what he would like, he responds, "What I would like . . . has no bearing on the matter" (Pinter, 1984, p. 5). This statement is the voice of bare life itself, acknowledging that desire, will, and personhood have been rendered irrelevant by the sovereign's power. As Agamben (1998) argues, the homo sacer is the one who "may be killed but not sacrificed" (p. 8), whose life is reduced to "a life that exists solely in its biological form, without political value or recognition" (Konderak, 2012, p. 6). Victor's condition exemplifies this

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reduction: he is physically present but politically absent, a body that can be tortured and mutilated without legal consequence.

Gila, his wife, is subjected to sexual humiliation and the threat of rape; her torn clothes and bruised body are the visible signs of her reduction to a body that can be violated without consequence. Nicolas's interrogation of Gila reveals the gendered nature of bare life. He asks her: "Have they been raping you? . . . How many times have you been raped?" (Pinter, 1984, p. 22). These questions are not genuine inquiries but performative acts of power designed to reduce Gila to her body, to strip her of her identity, and to produce her as bare life. The rape is not simply a sexual act but a political act, a way of exercising power over the body, of producing bare life. As Konderak (2012) notes, this process involves a "politicisation of natural life and depoliticisation of qualified life" (p. 7), flattening the human into a shapeless entity between categories. Nicolas's comment that Gila is "a lovely woman. Well, you were" (Pinter, 1984, p. 23) reveals the logic of biopolitical control: her beauty, her humanity, her dignity have been stripped away by the sovereign's power.

Nicky, the child, is interrogated about his loyalty to soldiers and ultimately dismissed by Nicolas as "a little prick" (Pinter, 1984, p. 26), a phrase that reduces him to a disposable biological entity. The child is accused of crimes against the state, he "spat at my soldiers" and "kicked them" (Pinter, 1984, p. 15), but the absurdity of the accusation is irrelevant. The sovereign's power is absolute; the child is guilty simply because the sovereign says so. As Kaçmaz (2011) observes, "Nicky is killed although he has not the ability to commit a serious crime as he is just a little boy. On the contrary, it is Nicolas who commits a crime. He is not punished for his action and perhaps is praised by the state since he is thought to be serving the state" (p. 57). The family unit, which should be the site of private autonomy and care, is systematically destroyed, transformed into a public space of biopolitical control.

This depiction of bare life does not merely represent dehumanization; it cultivates the reader's critical awareness of the mechanisms of sovereign power. As Agamben (1998) argues, the production of bare life is not an aberration but the hidden foundation of sovereign power itself. By witnessing the systematic stripping away of Victor's, Gila's, and Nicky's humanity, the audience is forced to recognize that human rights are not inherent or inviolable but are contingent upon political recognition. The play reveals that the state can, at any moment, withdraw the protections of law and reduce any individual to bare life. This recognition is the first step in the cultivation of

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ethical consciousness: the audience comes to understand that the fragility of human rights is not a distant abstraction but a present possibility, one that requires constant vigilance and resistance. As Özmen Akdoğan (2016) notes, Pinter's political plays aim to "raise the consciousness of his reader/audience about the corrupt sides of their societies" (p. 338). The audience's discomfort, Merritt (1990) reports that "several people walked out midway through performances of One for the Road" (p. 142), is itself evidence of the play's pedagogical efficacy: the spectators are not allowed to remain passive consumers of violence but are forced to confront their own position as witnesses.

Biopolitics, Autonomy, and State Control

Agamben's concept of biopolitics illuminates the relationship between individual autonomy and state control in the play with particular force. Biopolitics, in Agamben's formulation, is the form of power that takes the management of life as its primary object, power that operates through life, managing it, determining the conditions of its existence, and deciding who is allowed to live and who is left to die (Agamben, 1998, p. 8). As Foucault (1990) argues, modern power is not merely repressive but productive; it "foster[s] life or disallow[s] it to the point of death" (p. 139). Nicolas's power in One for the Road is quintessentially biopolitical. He does not merely punish Victor; he governs his biological existence. Torture is the most explicit form of this governance: the state exercises power over the bodies of its victims directly, inflicting pain, humiliation, and degradation not as punishment for a specific crime but as a technique for managing life itself. Nicolas's descriptions of torture, his casual references to the destruction of Victor's home and the rape of Gila, are performances of power that reduce the victims to a state of pure subjection.

The family is transformed into a site of biopolitical control, where the state extends its management into the most intimate domains of existence, sexuality, reproduction, and the parent-child relationship. Nicolas's interrogation of Gila about rape, and his questioning of Nicky about soldiers and planes, are not merely cruel; they are techniques for the management of biological life, for the production of subjects who will conform to the state's demands. As Agamben (1998) argues, the sovereign's power is exercised not only over the juridical subject but over "the biological body" itself (p. 6). The interrogation chamber becomes a space where the state manages life at its most intimate level, regulating sexuality, reproduction, and the family itself. Nicolas's question to Nicky, "Would you like to be a soldier when you grow up?" (Pinter, 1984, p. 15), is not an innocent

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inquiry but a biopolitical intervention, an attempt to shape the child's future identity in accordance with the state's needs. As Batty (2001) observes, "from Bonaparte to Ceauşescu, it is not an uncommon practice for dictators to make soldiers of the orphans of victims, replacing their extant family structure with an all-providing patriarch in the form of the state" (p. 103).

This biopolitical analysis reveals the ethical responsibilities of citizens in surveillance states. The play demonstrates that totalitarian governance is not sustained by violence alone but by the complicity and passivity of those who witness it. Nicolas operates with impunity because he is shielded by the state apparatus and because the broader society, represented by the absent "man who runs this country" and the silent population, allows him to do so. The audience, positioned as witnesses to this spectacle, is confronted with a choice: to remain passive spectators or to recognize their own ethical obligation to resist. As Agamben (2005) argues, the state of exception becomes the paradigm of government when it is normalized, when the suspension of law becomes routine. Pinter's play dramatizes this normalization, showing how the exceptional becomes ordinary, and how citizens become complicit in their own subjection by failing to speak out. The cultivation of ethical consciousness, then, is not merely a matter of understanding the mechanisms of power but of recognizing one's own position within them. As Owens (2017) argues, Pinter's plays thematize "the state of exception" in a way that compels the audience to reflect on "the real-world truths of the politically engaged citizen" (p. 29).

Violence, Torture, and the Production of Bare Life

Violence in One for the Road is not merely thematic but structural. It operates as the explicit instrument of state terror and the hidden foundation of the sovereign's authority. Physical violence, the mutilation of Victor, the rape of Gila, the implied murder of Nicky, is the most obvious manifestation of sovereign power. However, the play's most disturbing violence is psychological. Nicolas's verbal abuse, his sexual threats, and his manipulation of the victims' emotions are forms of biopolitical control that manage life through the management of the psyche. The interrogation itself is a form of violence: the relentless questioning, the deliberate confusion, the refusal to provide any clear charge or justification, all of these constitute a psychological assault that breaks down the victim's sense of self. As Soudunsaari (2016) observes, Nicolas's questions "have no logical answer," and "the effect is to confuse the victim of the torture, to send Gila looking for

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answers to questions that do not have an answer. The goal is also to teach obedience: whatever Nicolas asks, Gila must answer, no matter how impossible the answer might be" (p. 47).

Nicolas's statement, "Despair, old fruit, is cancer. It should be castrated. Indeed, I've often found that that works. Chop the balls off and despair goes out the window" (Pinter, 1984, p. 12), is a grotesque justification of torture that reveals the sovereign's claim to cure the victim by eliminating his capacity for resistance. Analyzing this violence fosters a deeper critical understanding of the processes that produce bare life. The audience comes to see that violence is not an aberration but a technique of governance, and that the production of bare life requires the systematic destruction of the victim's will, identity, and relationships. As Amin and Muhammed (2024) argue, violence in the play functions as a "coercive tool to establish state control" (p. 556). The play thus reveals that totalitarian governance is not merely a matter of physical coercion but of psychological domination, the production of subjects who have internalized their own subjection.

The pedagogical effect of this violence is to cultivate a critical understanding of the mechanisms of totalitarian governance. The audience is forced to recognize that violence is not an exceptional occurrence but a routine technique of state power. As Quigley (2001) notes, the play dramatizes "the processes of self-justification" that torture promotes (p. 10). Nicolas justifies his violence through appeals to God, nation, and the state, transforming political violence into a sacred duty. This theocratic justification is a crucial mechanism of sovereign power, absolving the sovereign of guilt and responsibility while reinforcing the reduction of the victims to bare life. By analyzing this violence, the audience comes to understand that totalitarian governance is sustained not only by physical force but by ideological manipulation, the production of narratives that legitimize violence and delegitimize resistance.

The Interrogation Chamber as a Space of Exception

The interrogation chamber is the spatial realization of the state of exception. It is a zone where law and morality are suspended, where the sovereign operates without constraint, and where the victim is reduced to bare life. Agamben (2005) argues that the state of exception is not merely a temporal suspension of law but a spatial topology, a zone where normal order is suspended and sovereign discretion takes its place. The interrogation chamber in One for the Road is precisely such a zone. It has no legal basis, no due process, no appeal. Nicolas claims divine sanction for his power, "God

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speaks through me" (Pinter, 1984, p. 4), positioning himself as both political and theological sovereign. As Owens (2017) observes, Pinter's political plays "take place during sociopolitical states of exception" (p. 29), and the interrogation chamber is the most explicit dramatic realization of this condition.

The chamber challenges the boundaries of law, morality, and human dignity by demonstrating that these concepts are entirely absent within its walls. It is a space where anything can be done, where the sovereign's will is the only law. Nicolas's statement, "I can do absolutely anything I like" (Pinter, 1984, p. 2), encapsulates the essence of the state of exception: the sovereign is bound by no law, limited by no morality, and accountable to no one. As Konderak (2012) argues, the sovereign "produces an anomic space where violence unleashes, where law is suspended, and citizens become a bare life exposed to arbitrary decisions" (p. 5). This dramatic representation cultivates critical reflection on the fragility of legal protections. The audience is forced to recognize that the rule of law is not a natural or inevitable condition but a fragile achievement that can be suspended at any moment. The play thus serves as a warning about the dangers of unchecked sovereign power and the necessity of maintaining legal and moral constraints on state authority. As Ates (2019) argues, the play demonstrates how the state of exception creates "a legal vacuum" where individuals are "exposed to force without the mediation of legal guarantees" (p. 115). The pedagogical effect is to cultivate a critical awareness of the fragility of legal protections and the ethical obligations of witnesses to state violence.

Discussion

This article has examined how Harold Pinter's One for the Road stages Agambenian biopolitics to cultivate ethical consciousness in the reader or spectator. The analysis has demonstrated that the play reduces its victims to bare life through a systematic apparatus of sovereign power encompassing torture, sexual humiliation, psychological terror, and the destruction of family structures. Nicolas embodies the sovereign who operates beyond law in a permanent state of exception, while Victor, Gila, and Nicky are reduced to homines sacri, beings whose only remaining reality is their biological existence. The interrogation chamber functions as an explicit space of exception that challenges the boundaries of law, morality, and human dignity. The play's dramatic form is itself an instrument of ethical cultivation. By forcing the audience to witness the

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production of bare life, by refusing to provide easy resolutions or clear moral positions, and by implicating the audience in the spectacle of violence, Pinter compels spectators to confront the fragility of human rights and the mechanisms of sovereign power.

The findings of this study have significant implications for Pinter scholarship and for the broader field of political theatre. The analysis confirms and extends Owens's (2017) argument that Pinter's plays thematize the state of exception, demonstrating that the interrogation chamber is not merely a setting but a dramatic realization of Agamben's political philosophy. It also extends Roberts's (2021) pedagogical reading of Pinter, arguing that One for the Road itself functions as a critical pedagogy, a theatrical education in the mechanisms of totalitarian governance. The play does not merely represent totalitarianism; it educates against it. As Pinter himself stated in his Nobel lecture, "Innocent people, indeed, always suffer" (Pinter, 2005, p. 5). The play's concern is to portray the weakness of the individual against state oppression, a weakness that ultimately ends in submission and loss of identity. Yet the play also insists that this submission is not inevitable, that ethical consciousness, cultivated through the experience of witnessing, can enable resistance.

The implications of this study extend beyond Pinter scholarship. In an era of resurgent authoritarianism, indefinite detention, and the normalization of surveillance and torture, One for the Road remains urgently relevant. The play offers a theatrical education in the mechanisms of totalitarian governance, teaching audiences to recognize the signs of the state of exception and to resist the reduction of human beings to bare life. It insists that ethical consciousness is not a given but must be cultivated through critical engagement with the spectacle of power. As Agamben (1998) reminds us, the production of bare life is not the opposite of political order but one of its fundamental, ongoing operations. Pinter's great achievement is to make this operation visible, to force the audience to see the structures of sovereignty that operate in the shadows, and to demand that they respond not with silence but with ethical resistance. The silent spectacle of power is broken only when the witness refuses to remain silent.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Kharazmi University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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