

Discourse of Self and Other in Landscape by Harold Pinter

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Abstract

This paper explores Harold Pinter's Landscape as a pivotal representation of the complex dynamics between the subjective self and social reality. It investigates how the characters' introspection blurs the line between objective and subjective truths, highlighting their disillusionment with present-day existence and their reliance on past memories for solace. Through a dialectic discourse, Pinter's characters reconstruct their identities and relationships, presenting fragmented versions of truth that reveal the unreliability of perception and the challenges of communication. The play's intense focus on the stream of consciousness demonstrates how memory, perception, and social structures influence the understanding of self and others, particularly in the context of gender dynamics. Beth's introspective, refined dialogue contrasts with Duff's coarse pragmatism, emphasizing the divergent ways they navigate their shared past. The paper situates Landscape within the broader Pinterian canon, examining its treatment of class, social roles, and gender relations, while also comparing its approach to other memory plays by Pinter and his contemporaries. It also explores the concept of solitude, examining how the individuals' inner monologues function as a haven and a hindrance to real connection. Ultimately, the paper underscores how Landscape dissects human relationships, showing how self-awareness and the need for self-definition collide with the desire for connection and recognition from the other.

Keyword: Harold Pinter, memory plays, stream of consciousness, gender dynamics, subjective vs objective reality

INTRODUCTION

Landscape is an important play in understanding the cumulative discourse of Self and Other or the conflict between social and existential definitions of Self. In other words, the dialectic between objective and subjective reality are intensified as the characters try to gather up their own lives through past and present. The gap here between subjective and objective reality is so great that to the characters re-living their past, the subjective truth embedded in the consciousness often appears more authentic than any other reality. The main problem of these plays is that there are versions of truth which are difficult to reconcile, but for the characters analysing their own past and assessing it, it is difficult to

accept such fragmentation. The difficulty of verification persistently highlights the importance of perception and perspective in the search for meaning and understanding.

Pinterian drama is fundamentally a drama of human relationships, determined by social status, positions of power, institutional forces, self-definitions, perception and perspective [1]. The plays discussed dramatically portray the view that every truth and any reality always exist at various levels, depending upon the point of view from which it is examined. What happens in every

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Received Date: October 03, 2024

Accepted Date: October 20, 2024

Published Date: December 26, 2024

Citation: Avantika Johri. Discourse of Self and Other in Landscape by Harold Pinter. Emerging Trends in Languages. 2025; 2(1): 10–17p.

Pinterian play - namely, that characters talk more to alleviate their own compulsive desires and ideas, rather than to invite the other's opinions and views - is here intensified to the extent that the characters use a subjective discourse of Self, failing altogether to respond to the Other's need for attention and sympathetic acceptance [2]. The concentration here on self-examination and self-consciousness is part of the cumulative Pinterian discourse on the meaning of truth and reality in the context of individual aspiration versus social constraint. The exploration of social structures through individual micro-realities, especially the realities associated with marital relationships or other kinds of man-woman relationships are particularly significant in these plays and the discourse of characters is marked by a sincere and intense attempt to relate Self and Other without masks and duplicity [3].

DISCOURSE OF SELF AND OTHER

In the Landscape, the characters sit and talk, assessing and analysing their pasts, much as characters in all Pinter-plays do, except that here the entire action of the play is taken over by such a concern, indeed a compulsive concern [4]. The past impinges upon the present and is a means of escaping from the disillusionment of everyday existence. Moments of heightened consciousness, much like the Wordsworthian "spots of time" can alleviate the stasis and boredom of the rest of life, as memory recreates the more intense emotions and feelings of the past [5]. Filtering these moments, assessing them through hindsight and accepting them in the light of immediate social reality, is a mission for the characters here.

Beth, the main player in Landscape, can live by the memory, for instance, of a chance encounter with a man on the beach, even as she puts up with the unimaginative chatter of her egotistical husband. Though all the characters in the play have significant pasts and consequent relationships and motives in the present yet, the explicit connections between past and present are never as clear as they are in the present play. The "stream of consciousness" technique used in the modern novel to reveal the drama of the mind is here prominently used to relate past, present and future, indeed to stress that in the psyche, all three moments often merge inextricably to make up the imperfect realities of human endeavour. Alan Bold in an excellent study entitled *You never Heard Such Silence*, writes that,

"objectively viewed, many of the interests that later emerge in Pinter's plays seem more suitable for fiction rather than realisation on stage ... for example involvement of the reader in the psyche of a single individual, around whom strange or fantastic psychic figurations may be projected, seems a much easier achievement for the novel, where a simple restriction of point of view is sufficient to effect the necessary concentration on individual consciousness as the modernist novel often demonstrates. Despite the possible example of Strindberg's A Dream Play, or of some of Pirandello's work this sort of concentration is obviously more difficult to achieve on stage, where it may seem impossible to make the audience share the point of view of a single character ... nevertheless, the success of Pinter's drama in the theatre as well as on radio and television testifies to the possibility of discovering means for realizing similar effects on stage and in comparison to Beckett's more widely-ranging philosophical and metaphysical presentation of the human condition ... the significance of Pinter's characters is more circumscribed by specific individuation and in accent and dialogue as well as stage setting they belong more closely to a recognizable social world." [6]

Alan Bold is quite right in believing that the memory plays are somewhat experimental in form and technique but concretely realistic presentations in comparison to the memory plays of Beckett, for instance. Even as he started writing Landscape, Pinter was aware that he was experimenting with a new form of drama, but since it was unpremeditated he did not know how it would evolve. This shows that the genesis of the play was a process of growth, dictated by the imminent positions and situations of the characters. The focus according to Pinter, was on the developing interaction between two characters and this was the core around which the play grew. Pinter emphasised the ordinariness of the situation in his account of the evolution of The Landscape and of the later plays in general. The beginning of The

Landscape interestingly reinforces the idea of process and open-endedness as the basic principle of his art [7].

In Landscape, specific kinds of discourse become important in characterising the consciousness and personality of the respective speakers [8]. Beth, who represents a particular point of view and a certain definition of man-woman relationships, uses a discourse of Self which in its emergent perspective, is entirely self-reflexive; it cleverly focuses upon her own needs as it exposes the insensitive, male point of view. Her discourse re-constructs male sexuality just the way she would like it to be, totally ignoring Duff's boorishness and lack of sentimentality. For Duff, woman is little better than a sexual object, but surely an object he cannot appropriate for his own use when it comes to Beth, his wife. Beth threatens and disrupts the stability and dominance of stereotyped male discourse as she re-creates her own idyllic love-scene with a lover. Her husband cannot define their relationship, feels the inadequacy of the situation, and makes a last-ditched attempt to re-invigorate a sour relationship. But Beth has become less vulnerable, as she is in her present state, self-contained and confident. Thus, she can successfully resist the images of male-dominated discourse by creating her own terms by which to define her identity. Duff's discourse is coarse in its imagery, its insensitivity and total disregard of any kind of etiquette or appropriateness. Beth's has a vision and a yearning for beauty, aesthetic balance and a painful awareness of unfulfillment. It is significant that Beth's discourse is distinctly characterised by its intensely emotional tones in contrast to Duff's loud practical and sometimes vulgar discourse. The starkness of the contrasts lends visibility to the inherently opposing point of view evolving through Beth's perspectives:

"DUFF- You used to wear a chain round your waist. took the chain off and the thimble, your thimble, your notebook, your pencil, your scissors.

Pause

You stood in the hall and banged the gong. Pause What the bloody hell are you doing banging that bloody gong?

Pause

BETH- So that I never lost track. Even though even when, I asked him to turn, to look at me but I couldn't see his look

Pause

I couldn't see whether he was looking at me.

Pause

Although he had turned. And appeared to be looking at me.

DUFF- The thimble, the keys, and the scissors slid off it and clattered down when I removed the chain. Down the hall, I kicked the gong. The dog came in ... I assumed you would embrace me, give me a kiss...perhaps offer yourself to me. I would have carried you in front of the dog, man-like, on the stone in the hall, striking the gong, but watch out that you don't get the scissors up your arse, or the thimble, don't worry, I'll toss them for the dog to chase. The dog will be content and use his paws to play with the thimble, I'll bang the gong on the floor while you beg me like a woman. If the sound is too flat or lacks resonance, I'll hang it back on its hook and bang you against it while swinging and gonging. This will wake everyone up and call everyone to dinner. Lunch is up, so bring out the bacon and bang your beautiful head, but make sure the dog doesn't swallow the thimble, slam –

Silence

BETH- He lay above me and looked down at me. He supported my shoulder.

Pause

So, tender his touch on my neck. So softly his kiss on my cheek.

Pause

My hand on his rib.

Pause

So sweetly the sand over me. Tiny the sand on my skin.

Pause.

Oh, my true love I said."

Dianne Macdonell in *Theories of Discourse* has shown that a particular counter-discourse not only gives visibility to new perspectives but also validates all other transgressing discourses [9,10]. A particular discourse often constructs itself out of opposition to a given situation. Beth's discourse in Landscape is one that becomes possible only as the result of a contradicting truth at the heart of her relationship with Duff. The past here becomes a means of controlling the present and of defining the nature of desire and Self. This is achieved through knowledge gained at the expense of a wasted youth. This play exposes the power behind stereotypical roles and the emotions associated with these, suggesting that possibilities of renewal can exist only for the individual who can move into enclaves of knowledge that break the paradigms of gender roles and static class barriers.

Duff is circumscribed by his class, status and situation while Beth is certainly less typical, more imaginative and probably more ready to break from a stifling situation. Discourse here is a means for unburdening, for understanding of Self, and therefore for validating different spheres of life - like the imaginative and the practical - represented by Beth and Duff respectively:

"BETH - But I was up early. There was a lot to accomplish and tidy up.... the dog was up. He followed me. Misty morning. Comes from the river.

DUFF- This fellow knew bugger all about beer. He didn't know I'd been trained as a cellarman. That's why I could speak with authority.

BETH- I opened the door and went out. There was no one about. The sun was shining. Wet, I mean wetness, all over the ground.

DUFF - The man in charge is a cellarman. He rises earlier than everybody else in the morning. Handle the barrels for the drayman. Down the slide through the cellar flaps. Lower them by rope to the racks. Rock them on the belly put a rim up them, use balance and leverage, hike them up onto the racks.

BETH- Still misty, but thinner, thinning.

DUFF- The bung is on the vertical, in the bunghole. Spile the bung. Hammer the spile through the centre of the bung. That lets the air through the bung, down the bunghole, lets the beer breathe.

BETH- Wetness all over the air. Sunny. Trees like feathers.

DUFF- Then you hammer the tap in."

This sequence ends with Beth's serene window-frame picture of children playing in the valley "Through the window I could see down into the valley. I saw children in the valley" while Duff's concluding reminiscence is that of having scored a point "he said he thought they piped the beer from a tanker into metal containers. They might, I replied, but he wasn't referring to the beer's quality. He accepted the point." Earlier too, Beth makes a reference to children when she expresses her yearning for motherhood. Perhaps the only sublime reference to motherhood in the entire canon of Pinter's drama, it is unfulfilled and is full of pain. One critic has described Beth as having a "transcendent being" Beth, according to this opinion, does not accept Duff who "offers himself to her" but dreams instead of a lover who will never have any expectations of her, existing only to fulfil her fantasies rather than his own aspirations. This is perhaps partly true because Beth's vision of love, unlike that of Duff, is sublime and romantic. Duff's vision, on the other hand, is reminiscent of Richard in *The Lover*, who is always, even in fantasy, mindful of his own ego, his own needs and his own refinements. To a certain extent, Beth is oblivious of Duff's presence and needs, but this is because he has been unfaithful to her in the past. They have drifted apart and continue to do so, living in their own circumscribed worlds and failing to make compromises in the present.

Beth and Duff cannot cope with their social situation and try to create possibilities of escaping from the impending everyday reality by turning to either their pasts or their dreams and aspirations, instead of accepting things as they are. They actually try to interpret their pasts through their present understanding and beliefs. This is, as shown earlier, a means of reality maintenance, of reminding themselves how and why their situations are necessarily defined by certain relationships and

experiences in a shared past. It is also perhaps, a coming to terms with their disappointments and limitations - perhaps a way of accepting the bitter truth.

Whereas in the play looked at so far, the characters hide true intent under their words, often sending misleading signals through superficial encounters and concocted self-images. Landscape in contrast, is actually a sort of confession and a revelation of the emotions that haunt the speakers. The images, personalities, and interactions that are uppermost in their minds are used to construct and re-construct the meaning of their lives. For Beth, the crucial moments are moments of sensuous fulfilment, of aesthetic appreciation, and spontaneous rapport. Re-assurance from an other's gaze is particularly necessary for her wellbeing and solace. For instance, she believes she is beautiful but is a little upset and dislocated by the unfriendly gaze of other women. She is on the defensive, attributing her difference to the way she dresses. Importantly, while Duff looks for sameness - a commonality between himself and other men - Beth bases her self-analysis on the recognition of crucial differences between herself and others. Even though she states that she "looks like anyone else" she is not normally like everyone else, in her opinions and habits and has to make a tremendous effort to be like others. Beth's reconstruction of her past is overwhelmingly intense as seen by the habitual pauses and silences that convey her emotional exhaustion and inability to deal with the intensity of her experiences. She remembers all the nuances, the gestures, the body-language that constructed her fragile encounter on the beach. Beth's discourse is gender-specific and immediately sets her apart from Duff because it is a discourse of aesthetic refinement and feminine delicacy. Beth's discourse is introverted and only partially visible through the contours of her consciousness. The sheer intensity of her emotions leaves her incapable of revealing all that she is burdened with. What matters to her is the other's meanings and gestures and an assurance of being appreciated and loved. But according to the stage directions at the beginning of the play she neither looks at Duff nor does she respond to him even though both sit at either end of a long kitchen table in their employer's abandoned country house. This means that there is probably a serious flaw in her relationship with Duff, probably a complete difference in interests and understanding of life. Duff also does not look at her but hears her voice and tries to draw her into the present circumstances without much success. So, there is a difference in their "levels of awareness and expression." Beth's discourse of artistic detail records every subtlety including the curve of the mouth or the creased nose, underlining that the experience on the beach is so etched in her memory that it is impossible to displace it with anything else.

It is remarkable that Beth is rather serious and sensitive. Duff complains that, "In your younger years...you didn't laugh often. You were ... grave." Duff is totally out of tune with Beth throughout, because Beth's aspirations and sensibilities set her apart from the social-class and status they belong to.

Beth finds it necessary to repeat certain statements to convince herself as it were, of their reality and truth. She is impressed with her own seriousness and is carried away by her own overpowering emotions. The degree to which these are reciprocated is completely unknown to us. The sexual experience she describes for instance, is analysed and judged by her twin ideals of proportion and balance. The idea of subtlety, of delicacy and refinement, is probably a result of her knowledge of art. This also affects her image which she self-consciously maintains. Her gravity is so ingrained, it even prevents her from smiling. She laughs only when it is necessary to reciprocate to her lover. In fact, Duff, when he sees young people in the forest is struck by the idea that he never had laughter in his life because as a young couple he and Beth never laughed. She did not laugh; was always grave, so that the only moment in her life when she did laugh, is outstanding in her memory. Indeed, Beth takes life so seriously that she is constantly weighed down by propriety and perfection. As a result, she cannot bear much reality, preferring idealised love and imaginary, fictive perfection to imperfect reality even in her best moments. Duff, in contrast, is more practical and fully accepts and internalises his social role even as he perceives the anomalies and contradictions involved: For instance, within his professional role, he is fully competent and committed but not blind to his own situation vis-a-vis his employer's deeper motives. His assessment is, therefore, sharp, suggestive of meanings but judiciously understated. More

importantly he accepts it because expediency dictates that he should do so. Beth, on the other hand, is quite incapable of facing up to reality, even common everyday reality so that she is, like Rose in *The Room*, perennially dissatisfied and even deluded. But paradoxically enough she is a suitable candidate for change, indeed shocking change as she desires renewal strongly but is afraid to face it. Her act of shutting herself from the reality, from Duff, and her action of shutting her eyes are indications of this fear. She emphasises her moments on the beach blocking out the unpleasant moments completely, whereas Duff traverses the entire sequence of events from beginning to the moment in which he is situated. But while he does not imagine the future she does, showing that she prefers to live either in the past or in the future - ways of circumventing the impending reality. While Duff tries desperately to establish a rapport with Beth in the present and is pathetic in his imploring tone, she on the other hand, is lost in her own world and is content to perpetuate her memory of one particular interlude on the beach:

“DUFF- Do you like me to talk to you?”

Pause

Do you like me to tell you about all the things I've been doing?

Pause

About all the things I've been thinking?

Pause

Mmmmm?

Pause

I think you do.

BETH- And cuddled me.

Silence”

Beth's discourse of beauty, emotion and aesthetic appreciation is subtle and self-centred. While Duff can express his resentment of Mr. Sykes, and include his betrayal of Beth in his recollections, Beth does not speak of that “shock” nor does she touch upon her relationship with Duff at any other time in their lives. Discourses evolve from the experiences that characters want to verify/objectivate or make real in their present life. Thus, Duff's set of experiences have a range that determine his changing discourses. The authentic discourse of winemaking, the crudeness of his seduction of Beth, the discourse of the jealous husband and the out of doors, the discourse of the skilled worker and his discourse of confession and guilt ensure that there is less of a gap between his objective and subjective realities. Beth, in contrast, remains completely trapped within her subjective definitions, her exclusivity and her regrets.

Importantly, Self, mind and Other, are here inextricable parts of an emergent self-consciousness and each of these constitutes the vital links in the individual's evolving perception and acknowledgement of his/her social location. Social structures like marriage, class, community and social conventions are meticulously examined in this play through a social discourse that describes different kinds of interactions among individuals through the diverse situations of the play. Landscape thus examines the relation between class/status and Individual, as also between the existential self and social self. One example of this is Duff's professed unfaithfulness towards Beth. As a man he gives it as much importance as he does to his visit to the pub or his walk with the dog. By acting as he does, he is only endorsing the exploitative class structure whereby Duff's employer discreetly makes use of his wife. Duff enacts a travesty of this by transgressing Beth's rights and his own obligations towards her. Thus, Sykes and Duff act on the basic instinct of disempowering a weaker individual for the sake of defining a typically male ego. The man of means as well as the resourceful, street-smart Duff are both ultimately exploitative. Thus, the action and idea of using woman as object of self-enhancement and pleasure is part of the social environment in which diverse and subtle pacts are made or dissolved between different partners and in different circumstances.

Duff's matter-of-fact confession sends Beth into a shock that affects her self-esteem and confidence. In turn she has a pointless encounter with an unnamed person in order to recover from her sense of

betrayal. At this point of time, she acts only to assuage her feelings and to overcome shock and grief. It is not clear who her companion at the beach is but there is a possibility that it is Sykes, her employer. Duff's reiteration of the fact that in the past Sykes has chosen a fine dress for Beth and has been repeatedly over-appreciative of her household skills, is suggestive of a motivated move on the part of their employer. The relationship of Sykes and Beth is, as Duff hints, certainly devious, and is obviously irritating and offensive to Duff. It is also a probable reason for Duff's cynicism and despair. Sykes shows interest in the couple right from the start as he has ulterior motives. He obviously has designs on Beth and probably employs Duff to covertly make use of the arrangement for his own advantage. Duff is aware of all this, and this is probably the reason why he has no sympathy for "the bugger," as he calls him.

The fine details spelt out by the characters in *Landscape*, for instance their painstakingly minute and sequential narration of the events, is a familiar characteristic of the discourse of characters in all the plays discussed so far. But here it is a means of dissecting and truthfully dissecting the Self in terms of the Other. As seen earlier, this is an almost impossible task because it is difficult to enter fully into the intended meanings and motives of another's stream of consciousness. Each character has, therefore, to search for agonising answers within his/her imperfect understanding of Self and Other. Duff's need is to discover why Beth spurns his advances, and whether his knowledge of his environment can integrate him into the mainstream of life. Beth, on the other hand, has a consciousness of being different, of growing older, and of an impending future that will bring more changes and newer roles. She also has a painful awareness of being in socially inadequate company and circumstances - though capable of much refinement, taste and sensibility. The gap is tragic, and this is the characteristic mode of her discourse; Duff, on the other hand, though unsuccessful in his relationship with Beth is otherwise better integrated within his environment. His discourse is a recognition of the social diversity of life around him whereas Beth's discourse is stunted by her inability to move beyond the confines of a narrow focus. While Duff can partially bridge the gap between social and existential self, Beth can only lose herself further in exclusivity and alienation.

The persistence of minute analysis by Beth in this play can be described as the subjective onslaught of a consciousness in search of the meanings inherent in social gestures, social mannerisms and social rituals. Nothing at all escapes Beth's notice as she examines every common habitual and ordinary action for motive and meaning. In her mind marriage and love undergo the sort of scrutiny that can be described as psychologically intense [11]. Duff also has a knack for conveying nuances and intentions with brutal honesty and without reservation.

CONCLUSION

In *Landscape*, there is a "dynamic" relationship between mind and Self, generating particular social attitudes and social problems. Duff and Beth commune with their own consciousness and often re-evaluate the Self in terms of their experiences with others. Their self-reflections give us an insight into the quality of their minds and thoughts. This process of self-examination is honest and intense, enabling the characters to nurture an identity for themselves - an identity that is forged out of self-evaluation as well as through a perception of the other's opinion of themselves. The compulsive and persistent stream of consciousness in the play can be understood as the attempt of the mind to solve problems of social adjustment.

The mind is not simply activated by the self; in fact, it is made possible by the self. Humans have an active interaction with their surroundings because of their minds; instead of merely reacting to stimuli, they assess them and deliberately choose the best course of action. When there is an issue, when someone is purposefully adapting to the environment in an attempt to escape hardship or pain, consciousness is engaged. Knowing the past, one is attempting to change the circumstances so that the behavior can continue. Therefore, there is no consciousness in an empty universe; when the self perceives an identity as undesirable, the mind views it as an issue and devises a plan to resolve it.

One reason why the world of Landscape is often seen as "fragmented worlds," is because in the play the process of re-constructing one's own stream of consciousness, is laid bare, revealing how difficult it is for others to share the perspective of even shared experiences. The emphasis here on the difference of perspective and interpretation of experience also throws light on all the forays made into the area of "meaning" and "understanding" in play. Beth, in Landscape, reminisces a romantic interlude with her lover but ignores her husband in the present because the past appears more alive to her than her present. Like her, Ellen in Silence re-creates her past and relives the more intense moments but is not sure whether she is only remembering passively or whether she is in fact interpreting and creating new dimensions and perspectives for herself. Even though she moves back and forth between the present and the past, it is one continuous experience really, in her stream of consciousness. Her analysis of the meaning of memory is significant because the typical Pinter-character is always trying to re-create the past in order to either justify the present or because the past as always appears more attractive and therefore more bearable than the present; and it is not uncommon for these characters to distort the past if it interferes with their social status and social location in the present.

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