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T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett: Similar Material, Different Details of Execution

Despite the obvious genre difference, T.S. Eliot’s “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” and Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* has an uncanny resemblance in their theme and the frequent allusions and symbols. As leading modernists of the time, they shared some pioneering ideas on the limitations of the modern generation and what true literature should aspire to be. They criticized individuals of their era, especially the intellectuals, to be indecisive, languid, isolated, and unable to focus on the important aspects of life. In order to efficiently depict this attitude, Eliot creates a typical disheartened modern intellectual as a speaker, and Beckett sets four ridiculously absurd characters that each stand for different types of modern inanity. Moreover, both of their stance on ideal literature largely differed from the mainstream style. They wanted to break the restraints and staleness of literary traditions and encourage experimental usage of text while maintaining the connection with the literary tradition through a broad use of allusions. However, this does not necessarily mean that they yielded the same outcome. The distinct route that each writers decided to take with the theme, as well as their personal point of view, resulted in two unique literary masterpieces. Mainly, the rendition of the characters and the ending which corresponds to their predictions on the fate of human race are crucial divergence points.

The narrator of “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” is an intellectual who always lingers among the peripheral rather than the critical. Although he builds up the tension of his inner conflict through daring expressions such as “disturb the universe” and “force the moment to its crisis,” these phrases start with an uncertain “do I dare” or “would it have been worth while.” (45-46, 80, 90) Prufrock repeatedly hints to the possession of some divine truth, but juxtaposes it with triviality or signs of uncertainty and regresses. He climbs the stairs to expose something important, but soon “turn[s] back and descend[s] the stair” due to his lack of resolution and courage. (39) Even the epigraph implies action and counteraction in that Guido da Montefeltro confesses his sin but only because he is sure that it cannot be exposed to the world, eventually making it not a confession at all. Doing and undoing also exists in *Waiting for Godot* when Vladimir and Estragon agrees to go or hang themselves but never actually complete the action. Out of the four main characters, Vladimir resembles Prufrock the most, and amidst the meaningless conversation, he occasionally approaches an essential point. However, like Prufrock, his argument never reaches a meaningful conclusion but digresses to something petty instead. In act 1 lines 245-253, Vladimir suspects the arrival of Godot, the objective of their suffering, only to be overridden by Estragon’s complaint of being hungry. The comical hat exchange scene in act 2 line 349 also represents doing and undoing physically. Just like the meaningless circulation of hats, their inaction and indecisiveness results to nothing. In a larger sense, the repetition of events in act 2 without Estragon, Pozzo, Lucky and the boy’s recognition is an example of doing and undoing as well, since their lack of memory collectively nullifies what has happened in act 1.

The characters’ incapacity for human interaction is another criticized trait. Eliot depicts Prufrock as an isolated being with an excessive fear of human interaction. He has to “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” which means that he cannot engage in a genuine relationship. (27) He always needs a mask to cover his flaws, and plainly states his fear of others’ ridicule when he says “I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, //And in short, I was afraid.” (85-86) Failed communication is a major cause for his isolation and he expresses anxiety that the woman he loves will turn him down by saying “That is not what I meant at all. //That is not it, at all.” (97-98) Prufrock’s inability to communicate is further expressed when the mermaids sing to each other, excluding Prufrock. When he admits with frustration that “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” Eliot extends the issue to distrust in language. (104) Vladimir also fails to communicate even with the people right in front of him. His instructions to pull up the trousers is constantly misunderstood by Estragon, Lucky refuses to communicate at all and a simple question to Pozzo takes multiple attempts before finally reaching him. Beckett also criticizes the superficial and conventional language of intellectuals in Lucky’s lengthy ramble in act 1 line 639 with repeated pedantic jargons such as “qua,” “for reasons unknown,” and “time will tell.” His speech has an academic form but no actual meaning, which hinders meaningful communication.

Furthermore, Eliot and Beckett share a similar view on the ideal form of literature. Eliot believed that “the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.” (2521) Thus, Eliot tries to incorporate in his works the ambivalent qualities of specificity and allusiveness. The imagery and description must be concrete, but its meaning should not be overt. These contradictory characteristics merge and create a genre-wise ambiguous poem. Although “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” assumes an audience and has a refrain, it is neither a dramatic monologue nor a lyric poem, but somewhere in between the two subcategories, creating a new sensation. *Waiting for Godot* is equally blended in terms of subgenre. It has abundant comical aspects, the hat exchange scene being an iconic example, but the ending lacks harmony. The overall atmosphere is bleak and tragic, but death is viewed as a relief from the meaningless life. Here, the comic scenes emphasize the characters’ absurdity, and the tragic atmosphere raises awareness against indecisive and passionless attitude. This pioneering attempt proves that Eliot and Beckett felt the need to free themselves from mainstream conventional literature in order to create more effectively. The fact that Eliot refused to follow Georgianism and became an anti-Romanticist, and that Beckett discarded the conventional realism in theatre, pursued minimalism and eventually paved the way for post-modern literature prove their unique and experimental tendency.

These similarities characterize both Eliot and Beckett as a prominent modernist, yet the two authors had distinctive views on the current generation as well. One difference lies in the details of the main character. Prufrock is a timid and negatively self-aware figure. He constantly compares himself to significant characters such as John the Baptist, Lazarus, a prophet, and Hamlet. The refrain that mentions Michelangelo may allude to the statue of David which is a physically ideal being, and with his awareness of aging, these ironic contrasts make Prufrock even less confident and more incompetent. On the other hand, the characters surrounding Vladimir boosts his self-worth. Estragon is always dependent on Vladimir and shows significantly less sophistication in thought, making Vladimir a mother and a teacher figure. The fact that he is the only character who remembers what happened the day before and tries to transmit the memory to other characters proves his role as a precursor. Vladimir is also the only character who is capable of making an objective commentary to their situation as in the following:

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! *(Pause. Vehemently.)* Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. (Act 1 line 2526)

Thus, his awareness of truth and limitations of inaction foreshadows progress. In contrast to Prufrock’s ideal objects of comparison, standing out among the unenlightened as a struggling forerunner suggests Vladimir’s potential. The fact that Vladimir and Estragon are fully open with their emotions and care for each other further signals Beckett’s hope in humanity. While Estragon often talks about leaving Vladimir, they have a strong companionship that keeps them together. It is an imperfect relationship, but there are moments when they have an understanding, such as when Vladimir bears the cold to keep Estragon warm with his coat and when Estragon knows that Vladimir fears loneliness more than death. For Prufrock, even though there is a “you” within the poem, the actual existence of a listener is questionable since there is no meaningful interaction between them, which makes it an interior monologue rather than a dramatic monologue.

Another difference is their prediction for the human race. In Eliot’s last three lines, a collective “we” that expands the discussion to all humans. They linger idly and inactively in the sea and when the opportunity for human interaction finally arrived, they cannot handle it and drown instead. This expresses Eliot’s pessimistic viewpoint. The poem ends with a failure, and that is what he predicts for his generation’s indecisiveness and isolation. Conversely, Beckett leaves hints of hope within the play. One might think that act 2 is a meaningless repetition of act 1, but in reality, there are two crucial distinctions that indicate the possibility of change. One is the leaves that were not present in act 1. The sprouting of leaves symbolizes birth and adds liveliness to the desolate stage setting, presaging a hopeful realization and action. Vladimir’s reaction to the boy is another major change. In act 1, Vladimir is uncertain when the boy fails to recognize him, but in act 2, he expresses frustration because he has become more confident about his existence and memory. His violent confusion seems like the most lucid and reasonable action of the entire play, signaling that growth was present between acts 1 and 2:

Vladimir: Tell him . . . *(he hesitates)* . . . tell him you saw me and that . . . *(he hesitates)* . . . that you saw me*. (Pause. Vladimir advances, the Boy recoils. Vladimir halts, the Boy halts. With sudden violence.)* You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me! (Act 2 line 829)

These evidences allude to Beckett’s hope for humanity that coexists with his criticism.

Eliot and Beckett’s experimental and liberal tendencies lead them to pursue a pioneering career in literature. They were both interested in their generation’s inaction, inability to focus on the crucial, lack of interpersonal communication, and wished to portray this by creating an absurd character and using an amalgamated subgenre. However, they diverge in the character’s role and degree of isolation, and their stance on the possibility of change. Eliot uses a tragic and desolate ending while Beckett suggests potential growth. Beckett’s glimpse of hope can be seen in the two small changes between act 1 and act 2, namely the leaves on the tree and Vladimir’s reaction to the boy’s denial of recognition. In a nutshell, they started off with a similar material, but took a different direction of execution, thus creating two brilliant masterpieces. (Word count: 1810)