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Alienation Isolation and the Loss of Identity: Examining the Works of T.S Eliot and Samuel Beckett

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A growing sense of aloofness, alienation and rootlessness pervades in the works of modernist writers Eliot and Beckett resulting in the loss of identity making life futile and empty, thanks to the brunt of horrors of the two world wars that modernism had to bear. This paper critically examines the fractured existence of humanity, of man's alienation in a hostile universe and the inevitability of death in a world incapacitated by the devastations of war. Their narratives depict motifs of alienation, isolation and desolation portraying the futility of human existence. The paper presents insights as to how both Eliot and Beckett critique the superficiality and pretensions of the urban squalor reducing individuals to nothing more than objects, depicting a life full of monotony and misery.

“We cannot think of ourselves, we can only live, we cannot even conceive of ourselves as having a single clear identity; ... our being can only be found amidst the shifting currents of our most immediate experience”, observes philosopher Henri Bergson depicting the modern reality, its rootlessness and its dissatisfactions. Set in the squalor of the urban metropolis, the literature of modernism manifests the breakdown of social norms and cultural strictures, the rejection of history, substituting it with a mythic past, “borrowed without chronology,” and the growing sense of alienation and isolation in a world wherein daily existence is synonymous with “living death.”(Ellis: 24)

Deeply affected by the ambient disorderliness of the industrial city, its smokes, smells, scenes of low life and decay, the “insignia of disorganization and entropy,” of modern life on the verge of war, Thomas Stearns Eliot, famously known as the major proponent of 20th century poetry posed questions on the “received ideas and accepted appearances,” of everyday existence rather than providing answers for it.(Sharpe:34) Delving into the depths of despair, Eliot established the utter hollowness and disenchantment of a war-engulfed modern life, something that he explored in the poems written early in his writing career. The poems of Eliot, especially “Preludes,” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” as critic Southam observes, “deal with a problem of a structured external life which does not seem to be ‘real’ and an inner life whose profoundest level is of fragmentary glimpses that resist formulation.”(121) For Eliot, past and present coexist, while the remnants of the past manifests itself in memory, having no existence in reality, the present state of being also reflects a sense of nothingness and void, something that we see later in the 1940s and 1950s in the works of the ‘Absurd’ dramatist, Samuel Beckett. Of Beckett's writing, biographer Anthony Cronin remarks, “it has no plot, no climax, no beginning, no middle and no end...if a modernism liberated the writer from conventional storytelling and ordinary psychology, Beckett's writing took modernism just as far as it could go.”(Oppenheim: 142) Forming a transition between modernism and

postmodernism, Beckett has been regarded as Hugh Kenner affirms, “the last modernist ...alive and well in Paris...lives under the name of Beckett.”(Moi: 140)

Depressive and “uncomfortable in his skin,” Beckett was an outsider in his own life, something he portrays in his texts, wherein loveless and moribund individuals alienated from themselves and society, represent the problematic relations of human life to time and space while probing “the process of perception.”(Barry: 1999) The influence of the Second World War deep in him, his early prose writings during the 1940s depicted characters who struggled to participate in what critic Rita Felski calls the “lived process of routinization.” Beckettian individuals as is portrayed in the short fictions live on the edge of a social world, insecure, exposed and isolated.

My concern in this paper will be a close study of the poems “Preludes,” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” by T.S Eliot and the short fiction “The End,” by writer Samuel Beckett. In particular I would like to take a close look at the anxiety and alienation of the human condition, the individual lack of identity that the squalor of modern life has to offer as depicted in each of their works.

“Our world, and our place in it, is increasingly hard to understand and the sense of difficulty has been increasing for more than a hundred years,” writes critic G.S Fraser of modern reality. Instead of starting off with a preconceived notion of life or a rehearsed response to it, Eliot explores the dull sluggish struggle of everyday existence, depersonalizing individuals by talking about bodily members such as feet, hands, eyes and fingers, something that Eliot practiced in his famous poem “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Written early during the evolution of Modernism at a time of uncertainty, heightened by the apocalyptic effects of the First World War, Eliot’s displeasure with the concurrent modern world which he inhabited does not come as a surprise.

With a sense of decay and desolation pervading the scene of Eliot’s poem, “Prelude,” is structured on a twenty four hour day and captures the cyclic monotony by beginning at “Six o’clock”(line 3) in the first stanza and ending in the same place as indicated in the fourth stanza in the line, “At four, five and six o’clock.”(42) The drudgery and purposelessness of routine life that begins with winter nightfall in an urban back street together with the “indoor gloom and confined odour of cooking,” (Smith: 139) become pronounced. The images of decay and disintegration reflected in the suggestive phrases, "burnt-out ends," “grimy scraps,” “withered leaves,” “broken blinds,” (4 – 10) expose a world falling apart.

As a child, living in the area of the expanding city of St. Louis that bordered on slums, young Eliot as critic Sharpe observes was deeply influenced by the urban squalor that brought in his poems a kind of negative zest for such scenes and their inhabitants, an emptiness of sorts. Existentialism, a notion that surfaced out of ‘atheism’ and ‘absurdism’ something that questions the world and its irrationality, displacing and dislocating individuals from their identity, denying them of rationality and pragmatism is profoundly expressed in Eliot’s poem “Prelude.” To begin with, the very title of the poem appears ironic as the term “prelude” which signifies a musical introduction to a day of the modern

world, has no meaning in the poem as the poet epitomizes the monotony and staid schedule of urban life as he narrates the drudgery of daily existence, “The Winter evening settles down/ With smells of steak in the passageway/... And then the lighting of the lamps.”(1 – 2, 13) That man’s life is reduced to a kind of vacuum becomes apparent in the line “the burnt-ends of smoky days,”(4) suggesting a night that is a burnt-out end of a day, that is, a useless end to a useless day mirroring the emotion of despondency and isolation of the narrator.

The Second Prelude begins when “the morning comes to consciousness,” signifying the sterility of life consumed by the routine and orderliness of life in the city. Further the term “masquerades” also depicts false pretences and artificialities that individuals in an urban society engage into, concealing their true selves behind masks of deceit and affected shows, something that Eliot critiques questioning the “new urban lifestyle, its lack of direction and its surplus of contemplation and duty.”(Smidt: 77) Delving into the world of further disintegration and degradation, in Prelude Three, Eliot exposes one of the “thousand furnished rooms,” wherein a woman and as Patterson states, presumably a prostitute struggle to awake to yet another day of physical ravishment and humiliation, recollecting the “thousand sordid images/ Of which her soul is constituted,” (28) the repulsive haunting moments of the previous life that has reduced her soul into a commodity for lust. As critic Smith notes “yet more tragic is the realization that she is condemned to a life in hell from [where] there is no relief.”(141)

At this point, Eliot fuses the distress and misery of the woman (prostitute) with that of the street laid down somewhat like the prostitute on her bed, “trampled” incessantly by merciless pedestrians. In other words, Eliot I believe merges the internal experience with that of the external world. Thus, similar to the emptiness and desolation of the external life, the mind of the individual also suffers a sense of despair and misery. This assimilation of the internal with the external becomes pronounced in Prelude Four “when the soul of the street and the souls of the passer-by are fused into a single dominant image.”(Patterson: 144) Inspired by the Bradleyan philosophy of ‘finite centers,’ where feeling is fundamental to experience and that experience is reality, Eliot in his poems portrays individuals, feeling and experiencing the futility and hollowness of the modern world. Thus according to Worringer, in the modern world, the individual remains colonized by the experiences gathered from the world outside, something that renders his life with despondency and despair and deems him isolated and alienated from his individual thoughts and ideas.

The poem ends with a note of stagnation and boredom depicting a world that has come to a standstill, rarely evolving. The plight of woman and of the people at large together with the moribund condition of the street symbolizing the external world points up the meaninglessness of the universe. Of man’s lack of identity, toiling within the common place events of everyday life, Eliot’s observation is best described in the words of Smith, “in a modern world, no living entity proc[ceeds] by instinct toward an appointed goal but a worn out mechanism with parts stiffly toiling as without destination, it moves in epicyclic paths.”(141)

Written during the same period as the “Preludes,” Eliot’s poem “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” has been variously described as a “sick version of life,” or in Maxwell’s terms a poem “which does not mean anything”. (Patterson: 145) Unlike in “Preludes,” wherein Eliot depicts the stagnation and desolation of modern reality, narrating the commonplace events of daily existence that destroys the identity of individuals, Eliot’s “Rhapsody in a Windy Night,” manifests the memory of the protagonist to bring forth further images of despair and sterility that confirm the present moment. In keeping with the title of the poem ‘rhapsody’ which suggests an irregular and unstructured piece in music, the poem itself appears to be “an uncontrolled jumble of oddly juxtaposed images” in lines and stanzas of irregular length, with no consistent rhyme scheme but with “scattered rhymes, repetitions, and variations throughout.”(Hanlon) It is ironic to see that while the title of the poem implies a mood of frenzy and vivacity, images of sterility, isolation, decay and despair pervade the setting of the poem. Set in a moonlight midnight, the poem instead of experiencing a “profound emotional enrichment,” (Ellis: 22) that comes through a bond with Nature, undermines the lyricism of the Romantics by presenting a scenario of seedy urban brothels and ‘gas lamps,’ where even the moon seems diseased, “a washed-out small pox that cracks her face.”(53)

Written in the first person, though we as readers learn little about the distinct personality of the narrator, the poem revolves around the narrator’s nocturnal walk, passing a succession of street lamps. He seems to be colonized by their commands to consider the sordid images in the streets and the distorted images thrown up by his memory. In other words, the morbid images of the Paris night reflect the modern world that has only despair and misery to offer to men. That the narrator is controlled by an external world signifies his lack of individuality and consequently his loss of identity as he suffers a life full of isolation and emptiness. Here, Eliot I believe was influenced by the Bergsonian philosophy that asserted that, “the individual consciousness is limited to those aspects of the universe that affect the individual,” resulting in the emanation of fragmentary thoughts and memories - thoughts that are dominated and controlled by the street lamps.

Eliot, as critics believed during the early half of his literary production was greatly influenced by the motif of ‘free association’ that the Collage Group of Painters heralded. ‘Free association’, a Freudian term, advocated the flow of random emotions and thoughts without censoring them. Eliot’s poem “Rhapsody in a Windy Night,” represents the haphazard fragmentary thoughts and memories of the narrator. However the narrator’s thoughts according to me are as desolate as her memories. That is, the past coexisting with the present is as miserable and pathetic as the immediate, signifying emptiness in life in the modern world. Both worlds thus present “abhorrent, equally useless images of life.”(Patterson: 147) What we are presented in the poem is the observer or the narrator’s immediate experience with the world around him, the immediacy of which is emphasized by the clock progressing from midnight until four o’ clock. By juxtaposing the immediate observations with the reminiscences of the past, Eliot as critic Ellis observes, helps us as readers confront with nothing more than a “perspective – less collage structure.”(25) The nausea and hopelessness that the observer senses in his immediate and past world is reflected in the term ‘twisted’ which is used in abundance to reflect the desolation of both the tangible present world and that of life preserved in memory. The association of

objects like the “twisted branch,” “a broken spring”(29 – 31) implicating rusty useless objects with the objects of the immediately perceived world experienced in the image of the “torn and stained” dress of a woman the “corner of [whose] eye/ Twists like a crooked pin,”(19 – 21) indicate the uselessness and hollowness of life wherein a woman, presumably a prostitute remains nothing more than a ‘junkyard,’ a trifle in the modern world.

In “Rhapsody in a Windy Night,” writes critic Smidt, “impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways,” (82) and it is up to us to assess their significance. Eliot’s depiction of the quick action image of the “cat which flattens itself in the gutter,/ Slips out its tongue/ And devours a morsel of rancid butter,”(24 – 26) while it may appear “useless” as Patterson states, is in reality, imbued with a deeper significance of life. The image according to me depicts a modern man’s combat and struggle to survive in a world that is harsh and in-conducive to existence. A similar image is called upon from memory when the observer recollects the image of a “crab one afternoon in a pool/ An old crab with barnacles on his back/ Gripp[ing] the end of a stick which I held him,” connotating the endurance that both man and the external world has to undergo when all ‘strength has left.’(Ellis: 23) Further, Eliot and subsequently the observer’s disillusionment with life is at its highest when the image of the moon bears semblance to a prostitute implicated by a correspondence between the ‘wink’(48) of her feeble eye and the ‘twisted eye’(21) of the woman in the second stanza. Eliot’s sarcasm thus debunks the “vestal moon,” of romantic tradition, just as the other images of innocence and inspiration, the wind and music itself as implicated in the title of the poem ‘rhapsody,’ are subjected to sordid reappraisal. Of Eliot’s projection of the morbid reality of urban squalor, Riquelme observes, in Eliot’s poems “we have a virtually systematic scarification of all the Romantic images conventionally interpreted as signs of affirmation and fulfillment.”(Ellis: 23)

Towards the end of the poem, memory re-establishes the observer once again in the world of orderliness, stability and routine as reflected in the lines, “Here is the number on the door./ Memory!/ You have the key.”(68 – 70) In a world filled with despair and loss where memory serves only to illuminate sordid images of prostitutes, of the darkness and desolation of night life, the only option left for the observer is to return to his mundane existence as memory instead of helping him escape from the monotony of life intensifies it with images of hopelessness and hollowness that a modern industrial urban life has to offer. This return to the world of order, the normality of brushing teeth, “sleep and prepare for life,”(74) provides no refuge from the nocturnal flight, instead Eliot observes that to participate in daily existence is to meet with execution, existence is nothing more than “living death.”(Sharpe: 15) Thus, similar to Eliot’s “Prelude,” Eliot’s above analyzed poem recreates an atmosphere of sordid gloominess, of disillusionment and disharmony that characterizes the superficial life of the metropolis where existence lacks identity, denies one of individual freedom and thought and is nothing but a “fallen life-in-death, subverting perennial images of hope and renewal.”

Of Beckett, critic Nadeau writes, “Beckett settles us in a world of Nothing where some nothings which are men move about for nothing. The absurdity of the world and the

meaninglessness of our condition are conveyed in an absurd and deliberately in significant fashion.”(Perloff: 77) While Beckett’s early works, especially his short fictions written during the Second World War although finds no mention of the war nightmare, nevertheless alludes to man’s isolation and alienation and the moribund human condition in the post war years. Beckett’s “unrelenting emphasis” on bodily functions, critic Porter Abott observes, suggests a sense of alienation, meaninglessness and absurdity of life. Thus, nearly in his short stories and especially in “The End,” the characters or narrators are presented as ugly, smelly, homeless, friendless and loveless. Eating is a matter of sustenance rather than pleasure. The hollowness of a post war life takes its toll on these characters as sleep the only resort to peace and relief is intermittent and disturbed that takes place not in beds but in cowsheds, park benches, even in ditches and in case of the short story “The End”, the “upside down boat,” (Beckett: 27) in a shed of an abandoned private estate.

With the motifs of alienation, isolation and homelessness pervading the scene of Beckett’s short fiction, “The End,” begins with the expulsion from the hospital wherein the protagonist, the narrator of the story embarks on a journey through the town that at once is familiar and yet wholly alien as reflected in the lines that the narrator utters, “there were streets where I remembered none, some I did remember had vanished and others had completely changed their names.”(12) Throughout his journey that features encounters with dear ones and strangers, his desperate search for the fundamental amenities of life, food and shelter constantly, it seems, tries his patience, putting his sanity in question. Degrading, disintegrating, desolate no matter how life is, for Beckett’s protagonist death is not the end, “there is still an urgency to go on.”(Barry: 32)

Expelled from the sequestered comfort of the hospital or asylum or prison the protagonist becomes completely disoriented, lost in the streets that had once been familiar to him. An important aspect with Beckettian characters as critic observes is their inability to neither “embrace habit nor be included in the social habit of others.”(43) In keeping with this observation, the narrator of Beckett’s “The End,” stands apart from others for despite living in dire conditions, he does not accept ‘kindness’ and ‘sympathy’ from others, not letting go the ego and self-respect deeply embedded in his character. Beckett’s allusion to the bombing in London during the Second World War becomes apparent from the narrator’s impression of the city which once he knew so well had “become quite a different one,”(12) post war. The drudgery and monotony of a mechanized existence becomes apparent when the narrator cites the scene of him being “look at” (13) by the horses three times. Beckett, it seems quite in the Eliot-ian vein gives vent to the randomness of his thought, emanating from fragmentary experiences, something that symbolizes the fractured existence of human life in the modern times.

Unlike Eliot whose displeasure of his contemporary environment of superficial urban life and the misery of slums led him to portray the same in his poem, in Beckett’s fiction we find an inspiration, an enthusiasm of sorts to live on, the survival instinct is strong in almost all of his characters and the protagonist of his story “The End,” is no exception. Expelled yet once again from the basement room, cheated by the landlady, the narrator is compelled to sleep on a “heap of dung,” (18) in the fields outside the city. The

devastation of the war is at its worse when Beckett presents his readers with a view of the “cabin in the mountains... floors strewn with excrements both human and animal, with condoms and vomit,” (21) that remains the only dwelling, the lone shelter for the protagonist. Man is reduced to a beast, dwelling in caves, suckling on cows to satiate the basic needs of life. Lacking an identity and individuality of his own in a war devastated world, he is lost in the crowd, combating with death and the harsh realities of modern life, as the narrator does towards the end reduced to begging alms, making his bed in an upturned boat, “living among rats,” eager to bite his “living flesh”. It is towards the end of the story that we as readers witness the protagonist’s inability to move on with life. Finally releasing the boat chain, letting it drift into the sea, he calls upon death as a resort to escape the degradation and decay that modern life has to offer as he says in the end, “the sea...crushed me in a mighty systole...memory came faint and cold...my life...without the courage to end or the strength to move on.”(30) While Marxist critics may have interpreted the text as something that exposed “the capitalist ethos of modern mechanized society,” (Perloff: 100) Beckett’s prime purpose was I believe to represent man’s alienation in a hostile universe, the trauma of existence and the inevitability of death. In a world, empty and hollow, isolation, rootlessness and dislocation are what characterize the life of Beckett’s protagonist denying them of identity and freedom to express individual thoughts and ideas.

Thus, both Eliot and Beckett provide us with a deep insight of the emptiness and despondency of a war devastated world, something that has ruined the human will to live. Motifs of alienation, isolation and desolation run rampant in all of the above analyzed texts portraying the futility of human existence. Reducing individuals to nothing more than objects, depicting a life full of monotony and misery both Eliot and Beckett critique the superficiality and pretensions of the urban squalor. However, for their part, both Eliot and Beckett as critic Sharpe observes, “pose questions instead of providing answers, thus giving us as Wittgenstein would have called a more “perspicacious view”(Perloff:102) of our present situation.

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