

Absurdism: The Catalyst of Self-Dissolution in Samuel Beckett and T. S. Eliot

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Anxiety, angst, inaction, indecision, and disorientation are all symptoms of absurdism in the works of Samuel Beckett and T. S. Eliot. This absurdism pervades a variety of these authors' poems and plays. Time, space, reality, perception, social interaction, identity, and existence are twisted by Beckett and Eliot to stimulate the effects of absurdism on their characters. Beckett showcases these absurdist themes prominently in his plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Eliot illustrates the notions of absurdism most notably in his poems "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Preludes." Beckett's and Eliot's emphasis on absurdism serves to exemplify an overarching theme—the dissolution of the self.

Self-dissolution acts as a prevalent malady in the Modernist and Postmodernist ages. The authors' diagnosis of the malady is similar, but their respective remedies show a stark divide. Eliot and Beckett both utilize absurdism as a tool to depict the self as a fragmented and disillusioned being; however, their understandings of absurdism and the human condition are different. Eliot indicates that the human self is hopeless, fragmented, and invalid without God. Only with the power of God can the self begin to resemble a whole functioning unit. Adversely, Beckett embraces the meaningless and incomplete nature of the human condition. Beckett offers no solution to this meaninglessness and mourns the loss of God. In fact, the condition of hopelessness is exactly what Beckett wishes to exemplify. Fundamentally, each writer enacts absurdism to display the cracked human but pursues this self-dissolution to different ends.

Absurdism is generally described as the idea that human existence is meaningless and that the universe is a chaotic plain of destruction that erases anything of intrinsic value. A number of philosophers have put forth their own interpretations of absurdism. One of these touchstone statements is made by Thomas Nagel in his essential work "The Absurd," where he interprets absurdism in life as "a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality" (718). This "discrepancy" between "pretension or aspiration" (718) in the lives of Beckett's and Eliot's characters is intentionally integrated into their poems and plays in order to make a statement about the modern

condition of the self. This condition is the erosion of meaning, purpose, and wholeness.

Absurdism acts as the catalyst for the dissolution of the self in each of these authors' works. Eliot and Beckett agree that the loss of self is an important issue of the Modern age, but their responses and ideas about this issue give some introspection into the Modern-Postmodern divide in literature. Defining this divide is essential in understanding each author's position in literary culture. Terry Wright defines *Modernism* in his article "Religion and Literature from the Modern to the Postmodern: Scott, Steiner, and Detweiler" by explaining, "the Modern, as I understand it, saw the twentieth century as asking a new set of questions about existence which required a new set of answers. The Modern also saw the need for a new canon, which could provide the focus for a fuller understanding of this new human condition" (4). These new sets of questions were born from a series of cataclysmic events that affected Western culture. Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, and it challenged the human-centered Christian faith that had dominated Western society for almost two thousand years. Faltering faith in the Church as an institute of knowledge and understanding inevitably led to a crisis of faith in Europe and estrangement from God. The World Wars also rocked the world with the degradation of human life, the industrialization of death, and the massive destruction they both caused. Modern and Postmodern writers and artists are reacting to these unsettling revelations about Western society. The institutions of old began to fade, and the Modernist and Postmodernist moved to replace these systems with their own visions or takes on the condition of Western society, especially in relation to the self.

The Modernist motto seemed to be "make it new," and this renewed sense of creation furthered the Modernist obsession with artistic novelty. But for Eliot, "make it new" was a multi-layered endeavor. Eliot moved to create a high Modernism in which complex poetry could address the complex nature of an industrialized Western society. Eliot began experimenting with rhyme scheme, syntax, structure, and literary style. Stream-of-consciousness verse, repetition, fragmented lines, and imagism were ways that he pioneered a new style of poetry; however, this stylistic experimentation

did not diminish Eliot's reverence for the Western tradition. Eliot's Modernist work includes massive amounts of Western literary allusions and Biblical imagery. He combined this with his studies on Eastern philosophy, such as the Upanishads, to create a substantive inventory of literature. With these advances in style and content, Eliot articulates a new form of Modernist poetry that attempts to direct Western society towards Christian faith and a revitalized understanding of the Western literary tradition. He saw this revitalized faith as an answer to the progressive dissolution of the self and the darkness and meaninglessness that encompassed the twentieth century.

Eliot suggests that the salvation of Western society is found in a close relationship with God. Naturally, a rejection of this solution leads to the degradation of the self. Eliot places absurdist aspects to display the consequences of such a rejection. In his eyes, Western society had already stepped away from this relationship. Isolation, the encroachment of time, and self-doubt are all addressed in a variety of industrial, religious, social, artistic, and poetic images that eventually culminate into a narrative that stresses the inherent meaning for humanity found in God. This quiet spiritual quest that Eliot embarks on in poems such as "Preludes" signifies his Modernist identity. Only in later poems such as "Ash Wednesday" and "Journey of the Magi" does Eliot's religious conviction shine openly as the solution to the ills of Western culture. But this attempt by Eliot to find a solution, to create a narrative, to journey towards some revitalized form of intrinsic meaning solidifies him as a true Modernist.

Adversely, Postmodern literature and thought represent a blatant rejection of all narratives, progress, and meaning that Modernism searches for. Intense skepticism and pessimism are found in the literature of Postmodernism. Universal morality, cultural values, and religious faith are often regarded as facets of political or cultural systems that will eventually fail. To authors like Beckett, anything metaphysical was to be disregarded, and depictions of suffering, meaninglessness, and confusion were essential in expressing the true dismal and futile state of the human condition. Beckett's Postmodernist thought also had a deep and unconventional relationship with human-applied meaning. This is a tenet of Postmodern literature. To Beckett, any philosophical path that suggested meaning was absurd. Unlike Eliot, Beckett accepts the existential crisis of Western society, and he essentially mourns this existentialism. Beckett's method of illustrating this meaninglessness is generally correlated with the "Theatre of the Absurd." In his plays, Beckett works with minimal props, few actors, and illogical dialogue to display the trivial nature of the human condition. His Postmodern goal is to utilize manic characters such as Clov, Hamm, Vladimir, and Estragon to reflect the meaninglessness of human lives and how humanity paradoxically applies meaning to meaninglessness. Alan Scott elaborates on this idea in his article "A Desperate Comedy:

Hope and Alienation in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*," by stating, "The educative force of Beckett's creative, imagined, torturous and nightmarish depiction of the cosmos forces us to recognize that our own reality might too be a representation and not an objective truth, that our own reality is as fictitious as the play on the stage, that we ourselves may well be strangers in a world of others' devising" (452). Beckett's Postmodern reflection of humanity, a ridden race of strife, is the vessel in which his plays radiate absurdism to display the dissolution of the self. To clearly view Eliot's Modernist absurdism and Beckett's Postmodern absurdism, it must be approached keeping the philosophical contexts and influences of each author in mind, so that this absurdism can be seen as a true tool of self-dissolution.

Theology is an essential piece of Eliot and Beckett's approach to absurdism. It is important to situate their respective religious beliefs (or lack thereof) before venturing further. These fields of study are vital when considering how absurdism is enacted to display the opaque nature of the self. Religion constitutes, to varying degrees, the ways in which each author addresses the decaying individual. The Modern and Postmodern world presents a void of meaning to humanity. Eliot and Beckett demonstrate their philosophical and theological outlook through the skewed and maladroit nature of their fictional characters.

The religious impact on Eliot's absurdism is a working contrast with Beckett's dimly existentialist absurdism. While they both display a decaying self, Eliot's religious sensibilities and his eventual conversion to Anglo-Catholicism almost covertly put forth a murmur of hope. In certain places throughout Eliot's absurdist writings, the language suggests that there can be a fulfillment of the self. Eliot asserts that fulfillment can be found only through a close relationship with God. Glimpses of salvation can be seen in numerous poems that Eliot writes. A reference to this Christian-inspired hope is seen in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." From the opening lines of the poem, Prufrock sets up an intended journey. This journey is a pilgrimage with intended fruition or action at the end. This language can be further explained when Barry Spurr writes in his article "Anglo-Catholicism and the 'Religious Turn' in Eliot's poetry" that "Eliot's principal metaphor is of a journey of self-discovery, in the context, here, of a search (futile, as it turns out) for human love" (139). Of course, this ultimately ends in failure, as Prufrock resigns back into his dilapidated outlook of the world. The intended journey has no satisfaction and no fruition. A depressing return to the cyclical confusion of the world is what comes from Prufrock on the brink of action. The mere reference to a goal, structure, fruition, or meaning is in stark contrast with Beckett's Postmodern absurdism.

Another poem that alludes to a deeper sense of meaning in Eliot is "Preludes." Eliot illustrates multiple instances of rising potential that culminate into nothing. One

of these preludes details, “You dozed, and watched the night revealing / The thousand sordid images / Of which your soul was constituted; They flickered against the ceiling” (lines 26-29), but it resolves with inaction as, “Sitting along the bed’s edge, where / You curled the papers from your hair, / Or clasped the yellow soles of feet / In the palms of both soiled hands” (lines 35-38). The inability to take action in the world depicted in “Preludes” is certainly infested with absurdism. In contrast to this meaningless inaction, the narrator explains briefly that he feels the presence of something greater than himself. This is seen when Eliot writes, “I am moved by fancies that are curled / Around these images, and cling: / The notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing” (lines 48-51). This quick indication of attainable meaning is soon blotted out by the sneering statement, “Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh; / The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots” (lines 52-54). This leaves no fulfillment or purpose to the sordid images of contemporary and urban life.

Meaning is present within the absurdist environment of Eliot’s Modernist poetry. It gives way to undercurrents of meaning, fulfillment, wholeness, and a complete self that Beckett does not give. Christianity is the crux upon which Eliot’s potential redemption is set upon. Eliot contends that as Western civilization moves farther from Christianity, it becomes more isolated from the inherent meaning given by God. As a consequence of this, self-dissolution occurs at a rapid pace.

Beckett indicates, throughout his plays, the belief systems that help craft his implementation of absurdism and his view of the self. An overarching theme in Beckett’s absurdist plays is the presence of meaninglessness. Humanity is meaningless to Beckett. The absence and silence of God only widen the vacuum of despair. Life is absurd to Beckett. As a result of this belief, Beckett attempts to avoid any indication of “metaphysical” in his works. This ontological, philosophical, and theological mindset can be seen throughout his works.

Endgame by Beckett is a poignant expression of these views. Characters such as Clov and Hamm are subject to suffering and dreariness. Hamm and Clov often accept, but constantly agonize over, the absence of purpose in their existence. Hamm contemplates the bleakness of his reality when he states, “Moments for nothing, now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended” (83). Hamm indicates Beckett’s philosophy of ultimate meaninglessness. The fundamental suffering of Clov also describes Beckett’s avoidance of any salvation, only the continuation of pain and suffering. An example of this is seen when Clov states, “Oh, I am willing to believe that they suffer as much as creatures can suffer. But does that mean their suffering equals mine? No doubt” (2). As the play continues, none of the characters offer any solution to this suffering or indicate that it has an end. There is no proposed purpose to it,

but only the hazy awareness that they are going through it. Clov and Hamm personify Beckett’s pessimistic outlook on existence.

The silence of God is a prevalent theme in Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*. This silence is an important aspect of Beckett’s approach to religion. Christianity’s beliefs dictate an inherent meaning to existence that Beckett wishes to cast off. He enacts the silence of God and the mortal struggles of Vladimir and Estragon to illustrate this. Silence and suffering are all that these two characters get. That is all. Beckett offers no more of a solution to this silence than God in his muteness. Beckett intends to avoid any notion of an inherent meaning to life. This lack of meaning is seen when an appointment was made involving Vladimir and Estragon. They are awaiting this being called “Godot,” so that they can be given instruction, fulfillment, meaning, and direction. This event never takes place, and so Vladimir and Estragon are stranded in the void of a meaningless existence. Spyridoula Athanasopoulou-Kypriou elaborates in his article “Samuel Beckett beyond the Problem of God” that “Following his general opposition to secular and religious metaphysical systems, that argue for universal principles and order, of a disintegrating world that has lost its certainties, traditional values and revelations of divine purpose” (40), Beckett contends that human structures ultimately fail, and life is constantly trying to dismantle these systems. This outlook on existence denies any optimism in the absence of God. This is unlike many nihilistic philosophers and authors.

Beckett’s pessimism towards the void of God is one of bleakness, and Beckett actively takes this view a step farther than nihilistic philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche. *Endgame* displays the desperation of human existence and the painful reality of meaninglessness. It exudes a bleakness that goes beyond the optimism and salvation in one’s self that Nietzsche puts forth. Thomas Dilworth and Christopher Langlois support this notion in their article “The Nietzschean Madman in Beckett’s *Endgame*” by stating, “In Beckett, all that is left to Godless humanity is absurdity and despair, which Hamm fearfully, habitually (and, for the audience, unsuccessfully) attempts to keep at bay through generating dialogue, enacting familiar routines, asking ‘the same questions’ and giving ‘the same answers’ (5), and retelling and extending a little his narrative (50–54)” (169). Nietzsche contends that fulfillment can be found in striving for the desires of the self, or becoming the best-self, an “*Übermensch*.” But for Beckett, the idea of the self seems to be the dilemma. Clov, Hamm, Estragon, and Vladimir are their own worst enemies. Their mismanaged actions, thoughtlessness, contradictory behavior, physical and mental pain all are products of themselves. Salvation in the self is not a solution for Beckett. He offers no salvation, and the idea of salvation is absurd by nature. The world is essentially empty.

Beckett strides right into the depths of theological emptiness. Yet the impact of religious imagery in Beckett’s

work should not be underestimated. He often evokes religious rhetoric and alludes to religious imagery to accentuate the absurdist and existential points that he is trying to make. Beckett himself is well acquainted with Christianity. He uses biblical allusions and imagery to frame the absurdism of Christian meaning, motifs, and themes. An example of this can be seen when Hersh Ziefman writes in his article "Religious Imagery in the Plays of Samuel Beckett" that "the casual relationship between divine cruelty and human suffering is perhaps the most effectively dramatized in Beckett's portrayal of many of his characters as emblematic Biblical sufferers" (86). This religious characterization allows Beckett to highlight the absurdities of religious meaning in the disarray of reality. An example of this characterization is found in his play *Endgame*.

With Beckett's and Eliot's influences and parameters defined, seeing the aspects of how each author implements absurdism to display the fractured nature of the human individual is necessary in understanding how they wish to emphasize their motives. Again, Eliot emphasizes the characteristics of the failed self to show how far Western society has strayed from God. Beckett invokes these absurdist aspects to dissolve any meaning in existence and to highlight the void of value in human existence. These intentions are perpetrated through a variety of aspects and depictions that explore the dissolution of the self. Much of the absurdism that is found in each of their work festers in the individual characters and then manifests itself into their respective surroundings. This absurdism initially constitutes itself in the characters' perceptions and identities.

The absurdist notion of identity acts a schema for further expeditions into the decrepit nature of the self. For Eliot and Beckett, identity does not work as a unifying theme to the characters in their works. Identity is only a figment that complicates the consistency and wholeness of the characters as individuals. Labels, generalizations, and self-reference allow absurdism to wreak havoc on the idea of a completed being. Beckett implements this convolution to accentuate the compromised lines under which humans refer to themselves. There is a fundamental confusion of identity between Vladimir and Estragon. An example of this is played out when Beckett writes:

VLADIMIR. Approach, my child.

BOY. Mister Albert...?

VLADIMIR. Yes. (40).

This conversation only clouds the lines of their identity. "Didi" and "Gogo" is how they refer to each other, but the play calls them "Vladimir" and "Estragon." The boys from each act address Vladimir as "Mister Albert." These accruing titles make identification and distinction much harder. The teetering identities sometimes blur the humanity of the

characters. It also complicates the anchor in which the play's audience or reader can relate to the characters themselves. Saeid Rahimpour comments on this in his article "Self Estrangement in Samuel Beckett's Existentialism and Theatre" when he writes,

One point which strikes readers' mind with regard to the ambiguity of self in Beckett's works is the fact that Beckett's characters, especially in his novels, do not seem human, and even though they are endowed with a name and human physical form, their identities do not remain stable long. For example, in *Waiting for Godot*, he introduces the hazardous zones in the life of the individual, perilous, precarious, mysterious and fertile, when, for a moment in the individual's life, the suffering of being replaces the boredom of living. (1670)

These twisting existential woes between the characters' respective identities bring about confusion and absurdity. The sheer number of titles for one character points to the absurd and convoluted nature of one's identity. Estragon never actually calls Vladimir "Mister Albert," and Vladimir does not recognize or mention his other aliases unless it is pointed out by an outside character. This leads back to the absurdist conflict of mind and body, with Didi and Gogo being one person and representing an inner struggle of a human or humanity as a whole. It also emphasizes the bubble that Estragon and Vladimir live in. Other titles, distinctions, or characterizations are brought by outside forces, and if they were not, Vladimir and Estragon would ramble in their own secluded world. This apparent identity-fluidity defines absurdism's grasp upon the characterization of Vladimir and Estragon. In some ways, the number of identities that are present in the play renders these distinctions inconsequential or useless. This displays a piece of Beckett's Postmodern philosophy that negates the distinctions, structures, or meanings that humans give to one another.

Eliot creates the identity of Prufrock as one of shattered pieces. These pieces only refract imitations of humanity, and they give light into how Prufrock actually identifies himself as an animal. In the poem, he envisions himself sitting among these women, or beings, as it seems, to have a conversation. But in an instant, his illogical perception conjures an emphasis on his volatile identity and his perceived inferiority. The language that Prufrock conveys in describing himself is animalistic. He describes this imaginative vision when he states, "The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase, / And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall, / Then how should I begin...?" (lines 56-59). He describes himself as a fly on the wall: wriggling from the grip of these women's eyes. He says later, "I should have been a pair of ragged claws, / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (lines 4-75).

None of these descriptions form a human individual. He relates his identity to creatures of helplessness. In many ways, he seems to be at odds with these other beings. His identity is tattered in this jungle of social apprehension. This idea is supported when Dominic Griffiths writes in his article "Daring to Disturb the Universe: Heidegger's Authenticity and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'" "The journey brings Prufrock to no certainty or answers, but instead culminates in Prufrockian angst, which is something constant throughout the poem. In Heideggerian terms, Prufrock is in constant tension between the 'they,' his own inauthenticity and the realisation of the possibility of his gaining his authentic self; as the poem will show, this is something he unfortunately never manages" (9). Confidence in himself is almost non-existent. Prufrock claims that he has "seen the moment of my greatness flicker" (line 84) and that he is an "attendant lord" who will "start a scene or two, / Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool, / Deferential" (lines 112-115). The way that he illustrates himself as a mere animal or servant that is bound to the wills of other people or emotions, such as anxiety and hesitation, is striking.

Identity not only serves as a component of Prufrock's intrapersonal views but also demonstrates his absurdist identification of others as well. Prufrock's view of the women that he observes is also quite warped. It looks as though he does not view them as complete human beings. His perspective shows the women in the room as indistinctive beings or even objects. He goes on to say, "For I have known them all already, known them all" (line 49). To Prufrock, these women are all the same: if he has seen one, then he has seen them all. Relating the identities of these women to everyone he has ever known demonstrates the absurdist identifiers that he possesses. He sees these women as fragmented beings, and he focuses on certain body parts and accents to express his exasperation. "I have known the eye already, known them all" (line 55) is a description of how he emphasizes a specific aspect of these women. Later, he mentions their "arms" and their "hair" (lines 63, 64) as separate forms. The formation of an individual is not seen in this poem. It would be impossible for Prufrock to identify one because his sense of self is eroded and convoluted. Prufrock obsesses over these extremities, but he cannot put these pieces together to create a completed self.

The boundaries of identity are manipulated by Beckett and Eliot to allow hesitation, confusion, complication, and illusion to reign over these character's minds and actions. It also accentuates the minimal resistance that Prufrock, Vladimir, and Estragon put up to orient their own existence. These absurdist notions illustrate the human self's inability to properly regulate itself, especially when outside influences intervene in their identity's mirages. Eliot's and Beckett's characters cannot master themselves, so how could they have any hope to sort out the world around them? Eliot and Beckett both insert absurdist qualities into external

forces that exemplifies meaninglessness, suffering, absurdity, and confusion.

One of these external forces that are pushing against these characters is the environment and its relation to reality. The environment and reality's relationship has an important role to play in explicating the broken perspectives of Eliot's and Beckett's characters. The dilapidated psyche has been brought under stress and anxiety from the pressing confines of reality, exploring the broken nature of the self. Confusion and isolation rule the absurdist setting. These forces ultimately culminate into nothing, just as these characters do. So this only exacerbates the already warped perception of these characters.

In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon fall into a cyclical and fretful perception that is defined by hesitation and confusion. The setting ascribes an absurdist potency to the viewpoints of Vladimir and Estragon. They both find themselves on a country road and near a tree. They wait for an arranged meeting with a mysterious character named Godot. Each of them claims that they must stay and wait for him, but Vladimir and Estragon express doubts and anxieties about the agreed time and place. They are not even sure this is where they are supposed to meet Godot, yet they continue to bide their time in hopes of meeting him. An example of this compromised perception is seen when Beckett writes Estragon questioning, "You're sure it was here?," and later Vladimir replying, "What are you insinuating? That we've come to the wrong place?" (6). They descend into a conversation that questions the very nature of their situation, as their perception is so clouded that they don't even know what they did the day before. They question the time that they have spent there themselves. The dwindling conversation is never resolved, and they continue with their futile affairs. Another example of their frayed perception is found in the simple stage directions that are found at the beginning of Act II when Beckett writes, "*The Tree had four or five leaves*" (47). A direction and depiction this simple shows the changing of seasons and the undetermined amount of time that has passed since Act I. What can be another example of the paradox of time is found in an earlier stage direction of Act II when it is directed "*Next day. Same time. Same place*" (47). The tree, which is a part of a simple setting, radiates confusion.

Beckett creates the tree as a reference point to which the audience attaches itself. The tree, in some ways, represents stability in this otherwise chaotic environment. Attaching to this tree, the audience is then more likely to notice the absurd changes in time and place, but also Vladimir and Estragon's indifference to reality itself. The reference point of perception that is the tree is also absurd. Structure or reliance in Beckett's setting can only be inferred or assumed. In the tree's lack of detail, the focal point of stability in this setting is just as opaque as the rest. Arthur Broomfield comments on this in his book *The Empty Too: Language and*

Philosophy in the Works of Samuel Beckett: “The assumed reality of the commonly perceived world is reduced to indefinable perceptions. The tree may be a willow, a bush or a shrub (6), and Saturday may be Sunday or Monday or Friday (7). The view we get of the physical world is that it is indeterminate, and important only insofar as Vladimir and Estragon cannot escape from it” (25). This indeterminate world is chaotic, and concrete meaning is evasive. Any hint of meaning is contrasted with the absurd nature of existence, and even when a sense of conscious meaning is perceived, it is hindered by the unconscious. Broomfield again elaborates on this by stating, “Beckett’s created dimension in *Waiting for Godot* is the place where the real becomes aware of its reality, and this reality is contrasted to the ultimate void over which non-being, the perceived world, is suspended” (33). Beckett constructs an absurd setting to exemplify the tattered perceptions of Vladimir and Estragon. The forces of the non-existent, such as reality and setting, actively work against any semblance of meaning or purpose in the existent. With Vladimir and Estragon in a constant state of confusion and hesitation, their perceptions continuously corrode the idea of a whole self. This corrosion is only furthered by the contradictory elements of the setting and reality.

Another example of Beckett utilizing reality and environment to exasperate meaning and perception is seen in his play *Endgame*. The main characters, Clov and Hamm, seem to be stuck in a house of minimal decoration or design. Even further, the presence of the kitchen in *Endgame* is an area where Clov reeks of meaninglessness and absurdism. When Clov is not doing meaningless and contradictory tasks for Hamm, he says, “I’ll go now to my kitchen, ten feet by ten feet by ten feet, and wait for him to whistle me” (1). His explains his existence as one where he will “lean on the table, and look at the wall, and wait for him to whistle me” (1). Clov exists in a state of presumptive inaction. He essentially cannot operate without Hamm barking orders at him, yet he longs to be in the kitchen, where he waits for Hamm to order him around. This idea is explained when Beckett writes:

CLOV. I’ll leave you, I have things to do.

HAMM. In your kitchen?

CLOV. Yes.

HAMM. What, I’d like to know.

CLOV. I look at the wall. (11)

Clov later states, “I see my light dying” (11) as he looks upon the walls of his square kitchen. This inaction stimulates images of bleakness, the mundane, futility, and exhaustion.

Beyond the limits of the kitchen and the main room, there seems to be an apocalyptic hellscape. This notion is supported when Hamm quips, “Outside of here it’s death” (8). A void surrounds Hamm and Clov, and each character seems

to be innately aware of this, but they do not process the isolation of their condition as a whole perception would. This is touched on when Beckett writes:

HAMM. Why do you stay with me?

CLOV. Why do you keep me?

HAMM. There is no one else.

CLOV. There is nowhere else. (6)

The despair in their conversation is evident. But it seems that there is no contemplation about their surroundings, only stale silence. The isolated nature of Hamm’s and Clov’s surroundings propagates their absurdist action and diction. The endless cyclical routine that Hamm and Clov are victims of is emphasized by the dilapidated environment around them. The environment and their stark reality disintegrate notions of free will, pleasure, purpose and freedom in this mundane and limited existence.

Similarly, perceptions of Eliot’s characters are constantly being shaken and suffocated by the meaningless reality and setting that is encroaching on them. An oppressive and closed environment contains the speaker of the poem. The reality that is presented in “Preludes” is an unfulfilled environment that is interjected with depictions of the dirtiness of urban life. Eliot contextualizes this world by explaining that, “The winter evening settles down / With smell of steaks in passageways” (lines 1-2) and “The burnt-out ends of smoky days” (line 4). These statements evoke an aura or scent of disgust that is contemporary in form. Between these images, the convention of time interrupts, “Six o’clock” (line 3) as if to remind someone or something of its presence. The day slowly dwindles down into nothing.

Again in the second stanza, the world is introduced by sordid images of urban life. “The morning comes to consciousness, / Of faint stale smells of beer / From the sawdust-trampled street / With all its muddy feet that press / To early coffee-stands” (lines 14-18) opens the setting with a strange limitation. Images that the narrator describes are menial and secondary. They are illustrations with no brevity. “To early coffee-stands” (line 18) and “faint stale smells of beer” (line 14) indicate some sort of motion or action, but it never goes beyond just that. Shallow depictions plague any sense of direction for the speaker, and the speaker’s presence in this world describes his or her sense of self or place: shallow. The speaker’s assumptions and interpretations of the world shine a light on the fragmented character. The focus on the subliminal aspects of a human environment acts as a vehicle of the absurd. These little details, movements, and moments are piling up into nothing. The conventions of daily life are trapping the speaker and the reader in its snare of poised inaction. Fruition is hindered by the surrounding world.

In his principal work “Memory and Desire in Eliot's ‘Preludes,’” Marion Montgomery elaborates, “But in the ‘Preludes,’ there is only ‘The notion of some infinitely gentle, / Infinitely suffering thing.’ That thing seems at best the awareness of its own locked world, in which the poem is suspended” (64). Awareness of potential action, meaning, or truth does not guarantee that it will actually occur, and Eliot is sure to convey that through his poetic environment. Eliot does not resolve the tension that builds up across the culminating images. Fulfillment is stifled by the limited scope of Eliot’s world.

The perceptions of Beckett’s and Eliot’s characters are being muddled by the setting and environment around them. They are trapped inside various environments that keep their perceptions from making a journey towards clarity. Each character’s observations, actions, or aspirations are halted and destroyed by the world that encroaches and dissuades any perception of substantiality. The environmental barrier between perceived potential and actuality is an aspect of absurdism that furthers the self-dissolution in each authors’ works. An element of this environment and its relation to reality is time. Time, or lack thereof, has a distinct and defined role to play in the absurdism of Beckett and Eliot.

The inconclusive nature of time is an aspect of absurdism that expands the dissolution of the self. In Beckett’s existential play *Waiting for Godot* and Eliot’s Modernist poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” time is an absurd concept. Continuity and consistency in relation to sequences of events is at best unreliable. The inability to perceive time shines light into the character’s cracked being, perception, and existential desperation.

In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” time for Prufrock is less of a mode of orientation, but more of a crutch to keep his indecision suspended. An example of this is when Eliot writes, “Time for you and time for me, / And time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of a toast and tea” (lines 31-34). He comforts his indecisions by insisting that there is time to act when his actions are never truly completed. Again and again, Prufrock attempts to talk to the women whom he senses in a distant room, but he stumbles out. While he is doing this, time never seems to change, and if it does, then it is a glimpse into the future or a dream of some sort. This is seen when Eliot writes, “I grow old... I grow old...” (line 120). These varying proportions of time and unclear direction collide with hesitation and extreme indecision to create an unreliable narrator. This unreliable narrator struggles to perceive the twisting volume of time and concrete relation.

Even further, abstract notions of events cloud how Prufrock actually perceives time. Eliot writes, “I have known them all already, known them all— / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life with coffee spoons” (lines 49-51). When one looks at the poem to follow a logical pattern, many lines appear to follow

a sensical pathway, but in just an instant, logical approaches to time are pushed aside. This is further dissected when Christina Wu, in her journal article “Exploring Poetry with Cognitive Neuroscience: T.S. Eliot's ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’” writes, “When reading the first few lines of ‘Prufrock’, one might assume that ‘The evening is spread out against the sky’ (l. 2) follows a similar logic, that the abstract domain of time acquires its structure through the concrete domain of space. However, this logic fails to explain the rest of the phrase: ‘like a patient etherised upon the table’ (l. 3)” (para. 18). The interjecting imagery pollutes any sense of reliable continuity in the text.

This meaningless and confusing passage of time is not limited to just the landmark poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” but is further demonstrated in other works such as “Preludes.” This signifies not only a continuous presence of absurdist tools but also the theme of self-dissolution. “Preludes” explores the parameters of time and continuity in relation to the viewpoint of a detached speaker. The poem initially evokes a plethora of orienting images, such as, “The winter evening settles down / with smell of steaks in passageways / Six o’clock. / The burnt-out ends of smoky days” (lines 1-4). Each part of this statement shows that the speaker is partially conscious of a procession of events. The detached speaker utilizes time as a false signifier of hope. Phrases such as “the morning comes to consciousness (line 14) bring forth feelings of renewal and a start of something worthwhile. Time stamps such as “at four and five and six o’clock” (line 42) radiate a procession of awakening that gives the reader a sensibility of progress; however, this is a sojourn that the reader and the narrator must deal with, as continuity and consolidation are wiped away by “ancient women / gathering fuel in vacant lots” (lines 53-54). Time invites a deceiving sense of a coming satisfaction. It sets the reader up to wait for a hope that never comes. Eliot utilizes this anticipation of action, fruition, purpose, and hope to explore the false sense of meaning that the decaying self has. This is a strategy that Beckett enacts meticulously in his play *Waiting for Godot*.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett manipulates time to exemplify absurdism that shatters the self. An example of the indefinite nature of time is found in the simple stage directions that are found at the beginning of Act II when Beckett writes, “*The Tree had four or five leaves*” (47). A direction and depiction this simple shows the changing of seasons and the undetermined amount of time that has passed since Act I. What can be another example of the paradox of time is found in an earlier stage direction of Act II when it is directed “*Next day. Same time. Same place*” (47). The tree, which is a part of a simple setting, radiates confusion. Beckett offers no background into how long Vladimir and Estragon have been at this particular place, and it could be inferred that Vladimir and Estragon have always been there. A moment that could signify their permanent residence near the tree is

found at the end of the play after they both agree on leaving. Their action is halted before it even begins by the direction “*They do not move*” (85) that falls heavy on the vagueness of time in this play.

Vagueness of time and place exemplifies the absurdity of the principal characters Vladimir and Estragon’s existence and their perception. Just as in Eliot, time is supposed to be a sense of hope for Vladimir and Estragon. They account their time spent waiting for Godot as a reason for his arrival to be at hand, but this perceived notion of progress is deceiving. Vladimir and Estragon soon find, as they probably already had before, that time and continuity are not something that their perceptions can rely on. Yet absurdly they continue to reference it as if the significance of it will change. An example of this confusion is seen when Beckett writes:

ESTRAGON. We came here yesterday.

VLADIMIR. Ah no, there you’re mistaken.

ESTRAGON. What did we do yesterday?

VLADIMIR. What did we do yesterday?

ESTRAGON. Yes. (7)

This only intensifies the absurdity of the confidence that they have in Godot, seeing that Godot’s appearance is completely based on time, and time is a warped mirage in the play. Time’s confusion manifests itself in other ways as well. As seen earlier, time’s passing manifests itself in the physical description of the setting, but not in the notes of stage directions. If anything, the stage directions would leave the audience even more stranded from an understanding of time than they already are. Time is an obstacle that Vladimir and Estragon perceive not just between themselves, but also in their interactions with other characters. Specifically, their conversations with the character(s) called “Boy” shed light on the distorted and absurd nature of time in the play. In Act I, the Boy appears to deliver a message to Vladimir. By the second scene, the Boy appears again, letting Vladimir and Estragon know that Godot will not make it that evening. Vladimir is evidently confused and asks:

VLADIMIR. Do you not recognize me?

BOY. No sir.

VLADIMIR. This is your first time.

BOY. Yes sir.

[Silence] (81)

This distortion of time is prevalent throughout the play, and it gives evidence to imply that the play’s time is mainly based

on the absurdity of Vladimir and Estragon’s skewed view of sequence and place. The presence of the Boy may also represent a foundation that Vladimir tries to tether himself to. He thinks he has seen this boy before, because of the Boy in Act I, but his attempt to contextualize himself is answered with a simple “No sir” (81). The inconclusive progression of time is an absurdist aspect that each of the authors utilizes to convey the distant nature of their characters from the world around them. This distance or rift only stimulates and encourages the unreliable concept of time in relation to these fragmented characters.

Time is a false hope in the poems and plays of Eliot and Beckett. It only twists the perceptions of the characters that it influences. In some cases, it even leads the audience or readers astray from what is concrete in the work. Time’s warping effects on the conventions of narration and the self are startling. It is one of the most definitive and influencing aspects of absurdism that motivates and displays the dissolution of the self.

The various aspects of perception, identity, environment, and time all function at once to produce an absurdism that is a defining factor of Eliot’s and Beckett’s literary work. This absurdism actively illustrates and displays a prevalent malady of the twentieth century—the dissolution of the self. Beckett’s Postmodern response to this malady, plays such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, implements the same absurdist elements as Eliot’s Modern response in his poems “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Preludes;” however, the absurdism that they each invoke offers different outcomes or solutions to the dissolution of the self. Eliot’s absurdism attempts to display the dissolution of the self as a consequence of Western society’s estrangement from God, while Beckett’s absurdism moves to display the meaninglessness of human-applied meaning and the human condition. Fundamentally, Eliot and Beckett utilize absurdism as a catalyst that can explore the human self and elaborate on their own complex philosophies on the condition of the human individual in the twentieth century.

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