

The Philosophy of emptiness in Eliot and Beckett

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Abstract

The poetry of TS Eliot and the dramas of Beckett have a close relationship to modern life. The width, height and the depth of post war life are exhibited in their works; the emptiness, the agony and the horror of modern life are represented in their writing. The waste land, The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Waiting for Godot sensitively reflect the utter emptiness of modern life. These two authors were greatly influenced by the two world wars. They noticed the hollowness and the meaninglessness of post war modern life and upheld the sheer emptiness of war- affected people in their respective works. The above mentioned three texts are closely related in terms of their themes. Each of them has a critical observation about the modern life especially after the Second World War. In that period human life was governed by faithlessness, spiritual dryness, moral emptiness, fragile relationship, alienation and fragmentation, political emptiness etc. This paper intends to show how Eliot and Beckett portrays the real picture of emptiness of modern western life from their own points of view.

Both Eliot and Beckett were the witnesses of the two great world wars. Each of them from their own point of view narrated their frustrating views of emptiness of post-war modern world in their writings. Emptiness of modern life, love, faith, spirituality, mutual relationship, morality, etc. were the major themes of Eliot and Beckett's works. Among all of their works Eliot's *The Wasteland*, *The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* mostly highlight the philosophy of the emptiness of modern western world. Eliot's 'the waste land' is in this respect a very true reflection of modern life in 1922; it talks of gramophone; trams; typist and insurance clerks; the brown fog of London, horns and motor cars; sandwich rappers and empty bottles. The rhythms of industry and the city are mirrored in the constant repetition; the poem foregrounds in the behavior of his characters. Ceremony and ritual have been overtaken by habit and compulsion, by individuals no longer purposeful but as Freud was arguing, driven by irrational forces and strong desire outside of their

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conscious control. This is representative of general confusion of motives, meanings and references in the waste land, a poem which also comments on the readers' uncertainty when faced with the act of interpretation: "You can not say or guess/ For you know only/ A heap of broken images"(Line21-22) . Again Eliot's *The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock* describes a middle aged modern man's psychological complexity which creates emptiness in his mind. Likewise Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' illustrates the timeless waiting for Godot who may come or may not come. This uncertainty leads the characters to meaninglessness, nothingness and finally to the emptiness. People in the world of 'Waiting for Godot' represent the people in the post-war modern world who find life also to be full of emptiness.

We as the readers of *The Waste Land*, notice carefully that love in this world is full of emptiness. Even love cannot exist in modern life as the poet portrays the hyacinth coming back from the hyacinth garden-

.....my eyes failed I neither
Living not dead and I knew nothing,
looking into the heart of light, the silence(Line: 39-41)

Madame Sosostris-another representative of the modern world. She has fallen a long way from the high function of her predecessors. She is engaged merely in vulgar fortune telling-merely one item in a generally vulgar civilization.

Eliot proceeds to draw the modern world by associating it's sterility and unreality with Baudelaire's 'Fourmillante cite' and Dante's 'Limbo'. The line 'I have not thought death had undone so many' (3rd Canto, inferno) and the line 'sighs, short and infrequent were exhaled' (4th Canto) represent the similarity of modern life and people of hell. Once again Eliot in line with Arnold depicts the void of modern love where the world of love has become only " a maze of confusion". He also appeals to the modern lovers in the voice of Arnold for being "true/ To one another".

Faithlessness is another vital aspect of the modern people. Mr. Matthiessen has already pointed that the 3rd Canto deals with Dante's Limbo which is occupied by those who on earth has lived without praise or blame. They share the abode with angels 'who were not betraying ,were faithful to God, but were for themselves.' They exemplify almost perfectly the secular attitude which dominates the modern world. The 4th Canto are inhabited by those who lived virtuously but died before the proclamation of the Gospel- they are the unbaptized. They form the 2nd of the two classes of people who inhabits Eliot's modern Wasteland: those who are secularized and those who have no knowledge of faith. Without a faith the life is in reality a death. Again in section five we find –

He who was living is now dead
we who were living are now dying
With a little patience. (Line: 329-331)

The poet does not say 'We who are living'-it is the death in life in Dante's Limbo. Life in the full sense has been lost. Eliot's faithless wasteland is nothing but an echo of the world which Arnold depicts in his poem *Dover Beach* where he turns to the action of the tide itself and

sees in its retreat a metaphor for the loss of faith in the modern age. Arnold expressed his grief in an auditory image (“ But now I only hear/ Its melancholy ,long, withdrawing roar”). In one sentence the “Waste Land” is “a stand against a world of broken faith” , as critics viewed.

The reader also perceives an empty setting in the life of modern west. Section ii gives a contrast between the two kinds of life, or rather two kinds of death. Contrast between life in a rich and magnificent setting and life in the low and vulgar setting of a London pub. But both scenes, however, antithetical they may appear superficially are scenes of modern life in the contemporary wasteland. In both of them life has lost its meaning. Mr. Allen Tate believes that in the first part ‘The woman.....is,.....the symbol of man at the present time. He is surrounded by the grandeurs of the past but he does not participate in them, they don’t sustain him.’ And to quote from another section of his commentary ‘the rich experience of the great tradition depicted in the room receives’ a violent shock in contrast with a game that symbolizes the inhuman abstraction of the modern mind. ‘Life has no meaning, history has no meaning, and there is no answer to the question’. ‘What shall we ever do?’ .The emptiness of modern life after the world wars is much more reflective in the following lines of *The Waste Land*:

What shall I do now? What shall I do?
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
With my hair down, so, what shall we do tomorrow
What shall we ever do? (Line: 130-133)

People are subject to sensuality, over-sensitivity and fits of nervous breakdown which are the reflection of emptiness. By playing a Game of chess they are trying to overcome the utter hollowness as in Sartr’s *Naseau* Roquentine, the protagonist, is trying to avoid the emptiness of life by writing a novel, though this is, somehow, a positive attempt to find out the significance of life rather than playing a game of Chess.

We are even given the picture of spiritual emptiness and sterility of modern life at the other end of the social scale – as reflected in the talk between two cockney woman in a London Pub-----

If you don’t like it you can get on with it, I said
Others can pick and choose if you can’t. (153-154)

Our contemporary wasteland is in large part the result of our scientific attitude of our complete secularization. Needless to say, lust defeats its own ends. The portrayal of the change of Philomel, by the Barbarous is a fitting commentary on the scene. The waste land of the legend came in this way; the modern waste land has come in this way. This view is corroborated by the change of tense to which Edmund Wilson has called attention:

“And still she cries & still the world pursues”

Apparently, the modern world partakes in the barbarous king’s action, &still partakes in that action .The conversation between the man and woman reflects the situation of modern people, she asks-

‘Are you alive or not?’

These people know nothing, see nothing, do not even live. Even Eliot's modern "Tiresias", who opens the poem, is not endowed with the ability to do anything.

Moral emptiness also exists to its great extent in 20th century modern world. In section iii we find the modern river. The contrast between Spenser's *Prothalamion* & its 20th century equivalent is jarring. In modern time the 'paramours' are now "the loitering heirs of city directors" & as for the "nuptials". We find a group of whores. The song of the Thames depicts a modern river soiled with oil & tar-

The river sweats

Oil & Tar (Line: 266-267)

Modern life changes Marvell's "Times winged chariot" to the modern automobile; Day's 'sounds of horns and hunting' has changed to the horns of the motors, and Actaeon who will not be brought face to face with Diana, goddess of chastity; Sweeney, type of the vulgar bourgeois, is to be brought to Mrs. Porter, hardly a type of chastity. Mr. Eugenides represents the 'homosexuality' of the modern world which is a "secret" & now a 'cult' but a very different cult from that which he ought to represent – the end of the new cult is not life, but, ironically, sterility.

In the modern wasteland, however, even the relation, between the man and woman is also sterile. The incident between the typist & the carbuncular young man is a picture of love. So exclusively & practically pursued that is not love at all. The tragic chorus to the scene is Tiresias; who, in *Oedipus Rex* recognized the curse on Oedipus & Jocasta because of the sinful sexual relationship committed in ignorance which still brought horror and remorse – with essential horror witnessed in the poem that the same act is not regarded as a sin at all – it is perfectly casual – merely the copulation of beasts. The reminiscence of the lines from Goldsmith's song in the description of the young woman's actions after the departure of her lover, gives concretely & ironically the utter breakdown of traditional standards. We have the song of three daughters of the river 'Thames' is reflecting the pathetic sexual condition of modern life. They have lost their virtue at the hands of several people. The woman speaking in the third song has no hope, no aspiration – she too is in the inferno –

I can connect

Nothing with nothing. (Line: 301-302)

Eliot depicts in various scenes of 'the Fire Sermon' the sterile burning of lust of modern man, freed from all restraints, in his cultivation of experience for experience's sake burns, but not with a 'hard, gemlike flame'. In section v again Eliot draws the sterility of modern life & lack of life giving water.

"There is not even silence in the mountains

But dry sterile thunder without rain (Line: 341-342)

Again, in the parallel lines ---‘the hooded figure’ & ‘hooded hordes’ we get a good picture of the emptiness of the modern life-----

Who is the third, who walks always behind me

Who are those hooded hordes swarming (Line: 359-369)

In the first case the figure is indistinct because it is spiritual; in the 2nd hooded hordes are indistinct because they are completely unspiritual-they are the people of the wasteland-

Shape without form, shade without---

Paralyzed force. Gesture without motion.

Eliot’s one more master piece to illustrate the sense of emptiness is *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* which relays the thoughts of a sexually frustrated middle-aged man who wants to say something but is afraid to do so, and ultimately does not. Actually Eliot’s Prufrock is nobody but a replica of a post-war modern man whose inner self is completely full of emptiness. That’s why he always tries to ask an "overwhelming question". What is that question then? There are many debates over the question. Some think that Prufrock is struggling within himself to propose a woman about his romantic self referring to different images of a lady’s arm’s and clothing and the last few lines in which Prufrock expresses his melancholic view since the mermaids will never sing for him. There is one interesting view that Prufrock is trying to narrate his deeper philosophical insight or disillusionment with the society he lives in , but simultaneously he is also afraid of the rejection by the ladies. To make the sense clearer we see Prufrock to indicate some frustrating lines like "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (line 51). This line is a true reflection of empty modern world where most of the people are suffering from inferiority complex like our Prufrock. There are some critics who strongly argue that a meaningless existence in the modern world is represented by the dilemma of Prufrock. Readers in the 1920s found that Prufrock is supposed to reflect the utter frustration and impotence of the modern individual. Through Prufrock Eliot is prone to depict the disenchanting desires and modern emptiness.

Now we will concentrate on another great dramatist who is of course a great contemporary of Eliot who is none but Samuel Beckett. We will now focus on his most famous work *Waiting for Godot* which also like poetry of Eliot reflects the philosophy of emptiness in the post war modern western world. How was Beckett influenced to write about the war –affected people rather than any other themes? What convinced him to write dramas like *Waiting for Godot* which reflects the theme of emptiness? For answering these questions we are first presenting some background knowledge from Beckett’s own life. Then we will go directly to the text of *Waiting for Godot* to show how it like the poetry of Eliot also gives attention to the empty theme of the modern world. In Saint-Lo Beckett witnessed a living example of the human capacity both for destructiveness and for stoical forbearance, courage, humanity, and even humor, in the face of brutal forces. It must also have stirred within him of what he had first seen as a youth in Dublin and Belfast and later, as an adult, in London, Germany, and wartime France. The Allied invasion of Saint –Lo was “possibly the most momentous epoch

in[humanity 's] annals". The once-beautiful Saint-Lo, now a grotesque funeral pyre, was a charred and broken world, every landmark transmuted into ash. The Saint-Lois had illustrated the combination of human misery and human resilience –the absurd victory –that Beckett would shortly write about. The townspeople had achieved liberation through unspeakable suffering. They had sustained the bizarre paradox of a relatively peaceful, if humiliating, enemy occupation, followed by a destructive, if liberating, victory. Freedom gained at the cost of incomprehensible despair, survivors of bombings, people suffering from tuberculosis and the disease of wartime----- all these things created a sense of emptiness in Beckett's mind and *Waiting for Godot* is the reflection of that emptiness. Javed Malick in his *introduction to Waiting for Godot* illustrates this emptiness in this way:

"There is, at the very centre of *Godot*, a certain emptiness which is both formal and semantic. It is around this vacuity that the play as a whole is organized. It confronts Gogo and Didi all the time as they desperately try to escape or fill it with their verbal and gestural gimmicks. The same vacuity also confronts the spectator/ reader allows the play to be experienced as a passive contemplation of this emptiness. It is not an ordinary, everyday kind of feeling which one sometimes experiences, for example, in waiting for a letter, a friend or an even. Rather, it is that metaphysical emptiness which confronts one when all meaning, all reason, all hope seem to have been removed from life and existence.(30)

Life in *Waiting for Godot* is full of emptiness. Two great world wars made western life void of meaning, significance and actuality. Post-war modern life has become futile and sterile. It has lost its own way and own destination. Life for modern western world is a boat without rudder. Only sense of nothingness controls life. Beckett through Vladimir and Estragon intends to prove the utter hollowness of western life. These two iconic characters find no meaning of their life. They merely meet life as it is full of meaninglessness. Even they find no escape from this purposelessness of their life. When Pozzo says, " I don't seem to be able(long hesitation).....to depart" , Estragon retorts "such is life" as if there were no escape from this barrenness of life. Again there is hopelessness in the minds of modern people. The hopeless vision of life as a brilliant moment between the womb and the tomb is stressed and explained by the words, "one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that enough for you?"(*Godot*, 146). Again Martin Esslin says "If one day is like any other there is nothing but fruitless repetition and no transition can take place." (Esslin, ed., *Samuel Beckett*, 127). This meaningless repetition ultimately implies the philosophy of emptiness.

Alienation and fragmentation are the vital aspects of emptiness of modern world. When human life is, somehow, alienated and isolated from the reality and human soul is disjointed from each other, life any way becomes empty. It is historically proved that the aftermath of any war is isolation, alienation and disintegration. It happened the same in the world of *Waiting for Godot*. In this world the minds of the people are segregated from each other. There is a gulf of distance among the souls. Here nobody is for anybody. People prefer being self centered. Humanity has little value in this world. Like the world of Icarus, people are isolated in the post war western world. People pay little attention to his neighbor. Javed Malick portrays the picture of fragmentation and emptiness in this way:

“An important and ironical consequence of this position in literature is that it leads not only to an attenuation of the objective reality but also to a fragmentation and eventual dissolution of the inner being itself, leaving nothing but a painful sense of emptiness in its wake.”(p-36)

Emptiness is also noticed in case of communication in *Waiting for Godot*. People here talk to each other but the words they use are not properly set. Linguistic disorder prevails in the expressions. Hence the disintegration of language is frequently visible. In order to uphold the emptiness in communication of post-war western world, Beckett frequently takes the shelter of fragmented language and thus he enables to show the misery of ex-communication of the modern world. The dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon can be the best example of this instance. Vladimir says----- ‘I felt lonely’ Estragon says-----‘ I had a dream’ . So lack of cohesion is noticed in the dialogue. This is nothing but failure of communication .Another failure of language is found in Act 2. In this act Vladimir says to Estragon -----‘I missed you-----and at the same time I was happy’(105). There is no proper relation in what he says and what he actually means. We come across more examples of disintegration in communication in Lucky’s following speech which is a metaphor of emptiness in communication of the modern world.

Given the existence as uttered forth in the
Public works of puncher and Wattmann of
A personal God quaquaquaqua with white
beard quaquaquaqua outside time without
extension who from the heights of divine
apathia divineathambia divine aphasia (86)

Besides, moral emptiness is visible in our present text. The western world is not free of moral emptiness. In this respect Beckett is a moralizer. Homosexuality is a sign of moral degradation of the modern world after the World War-II. Beckett through Vladimir and Estragon presents this moral decay of the western world .He shows Vladimir-Estragon relationship as quasi-marital: “They bicker, they embrace each other, they depend upon each other[....] They might be thought of as a married couple”.(78) In Act 1, Estragon speaks gently to his friend, approaching him slowly and laying a hand on his shoulder. After asking for his hand in turn and telling him not to be stubborn, he suddenly embraces him but backs off just as quickly, complaining, “You stink of garlic!” (79). When Estragon reminisces about his occasional glances at the Bible and remembers how prettily coloured were the maps of the Dead Sea, he remarks, "That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy” (80) Furthermore, the temptation to achieve post-mortem erections arises in the context of a world without females. Estragon in particular is "[h]ighly excited", in contrast with Vladimir, who chooses this moment to talk about shrieking mandrake”(79) His apparent indifference to his friend's arousal may be viewed as a sort of playful teasing. Another possible instance of homoeroticism has been discerned in the segment in which Estragon "sucks the end of it [his carrot]",(81)although Beckett describes this as a meditative action.

Unlike Eliot Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* refers to Political emptiness. Here Beckett allegorically uses Pozzo and Lucky's intrusion as the symbol of cold war or of French resistance to the Germans. Graham Hassell writes, "[T]he intrusion of Pozzo and Lucky [...] seems like nothing more than a metaphor for Ireland's view of mainland Britain, where society has ever been blighted by a greedy ruling élite keeping the working classes passive and ignorant by whatever means."(65). The pair (i.e. Vladimir and Estragon) is often played with Irish accents, as in the Beckett on Film project. This, some feel, is an inevitable consequence of Beckett's rhythms and phraseology, but it is not stipulated in the text. At any rate, they are not of English stock: at one point early in the play, Estragon mocks the English pronunciation of "calm" and has fun with "the story of the Englishman in the brothel"(66)

Beckett also noticed the human relationship after war in the western world is not humanistic. It is not as sound as it ought to be. There is utter hollowness in the relation. People in superior position regards people in lower position as slave. For this instance Beckett depicts the picture of Pozzo -Lucky relationship. Pozzo behaves with Lucky as a master. He treats Lucky as slave. It is not right for Pozzo to treat Lucky as he does. It is obviously unjust for Gogo to kick the fallen Lucky.

In line with presenting inner emptiness which is Beckett's main goal, he also portrays the outer emptiness. He depicts the stage such a way that any body can realize that this is a setting for upholding a philosophy of emptiness. For this reason he does not use any colorful image on the stage. There is only one scene throughout both acts. Two men are waiting on a country road by a tree. The men are of unspecified origin, though it is clear that they are not English by nationality (and in English-language productions are traditionally played with Irish accents). The script calls for Estragon to sit on a low mound but in practice – as in Beckett's own 1975 German production – this is usually a stone. In the first act the tree is bare. In the second, a few leaves have appeared despite the script specifying that it is the next day. The minimal description calls to mind "the idea of the lieu vague, a location which should not be particularised". Alan Schneider once suggested putting the play on in a round – Pozzo has often been commented on as a ringmaster (51)– but Beckett dissuaded him: "I don't in my ignorance agree with the round and feel *Godot* needs a very closed box." He even contemplated at one point having a "faint shadow of bars on stage floor". Again throughout the play as Miller writes in his *Interpretation of Literature* 'Vladimir and Estragon's trivial, routine, actions are used to fight the emptiness they are feeling in their lives. Beckett purposely uses a tree as the only prop on stage to give the audience the feeling of emptiness as well. An example of their trivial actions is the switching of hats between Vladimir and Estragon (80-81)'. Another example is Vladimir feeding carrots, radishes, and turnips to Estragon (16, 76).

Vladimir ends one of these trivial feedings saying, "This is becoming really insignificant".(Miller4)

After going through the article, readers come to know that all the three texts convey the message of emptiness of modern life after the two great world wars. Life after the wars has lost its actual meaning and significance. All the characters in these texts are struggling with meaninglessness and nothingness. Everything here is uncertain. People here are devoid of faith and morality. The relationships are fragile and based on hollowness. Nobody believes anybody. Life is full of frustration. All around there is no hope. Inferiority complex is also found here. Sea like faith is retreating. Sterility and unreality are the only truth. Confusion and misunderstanding lead the life. Secularism (Especially in 'The Waste Land') and vulgarity are not lagging behind. Vanity and immorality are also present. Purposelessness and worthlessness dominate the people. Alienation and fragmentation are reflected. This is a world which is free of humanity and sympathy. What remains here is complexity which produces disorder and disenchantment to govern the world. Degradation and deprivation follow the people and also suffer from superiority complex (Pozzo-Lucky relation). So, both Eliot and Beckett are equally successful in case of portraying the picture of emptiness existing in the modern western world in their works.

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