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Cover Page Footnote

I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Todd Kuchta, Associate Professor in the English Department of Western Michigan University, for his course in Modern British Literature and his encouragement of my wild theories.

Something is Rotten in the Unreal City: *Hamlet* in *The Waste Land*

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T.S. Eliot's poem of 1922, "The Waste Land," lays philosophical ground for the entire Modern literary movement in which human experience takes the performative shape of inner dialog or *soliloquy* for the benefit of the reader/audience. This essay will argue that Eliot's poem is a prime example of existentialism and, further, that Eliot's work is not merely informed by Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (possibly the earliest example of British existentialism), but is directly modeled *after* it, in Eliot's attempt to rectify the play's perceived failings.

Existentialism as a key to unlocking the mood of Modern literature is overlooked by those critics who relegate existentialist literature to the years following the Modern period. While the official "start date" of the philosophy begins after World War II, this paper will argue that the questions most posed by existentialism are not new to literature. They are at least as old as Shakespeare, in fact, and we see evidence of "the old questions" (to which Beckett alludes in the 1950s) in *Hamlet*, dated to 1600.

Specifically, *Hamlet* speaks to the Modern British development of inner narrative and the literal translation and evocation of thought. Readers have long referred to Hamlet as the depressive Danish prince, yet his thoughts are reflected in the minds of characters throughout Modern British literature, and such vapors swirl most gloriously in Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It is my argument that, while Eliot's critique of *Hamlet* concludes with its failure, there are clear parallels between his own poem and Shakespeare's play. Similarities exist in terms of structure, theme, motifs, protagonist/speaker, and style. Despite Eliot's critique, within the Modern literary tradition (which at its heart lionizes individual consciousness) *Hamlet* is never far from the page.

Before drawing our attention to specific echoes of *Hamlet* in *The Waste Land* (I will italicize both works as several critics italicize Eliot's lengthy poem; this measure assigns the play and the poem to the same category of writing for the sake of our thesis, and reflect both Bloom's argument that *Hamlet* is a poem, and my argument that "The Waste Land" is a play), it is vital that we revisit selections from Eliot's critique of *Hamlet*, from his essay "The Problems of Hamlet," published in 1920 in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*.

Eliot begins by separating Hamlet the character from *Hamlet* the play, claiming that he, unlike other critics, views *Hamlet* (the play) as the main "problem," and Hamlet (the character) as the second problem. In doing so, he positions himself as a superior mind, prepared to address what others have overlooked or confused. Just as quickly, Eliot derides other critics for not seeing beyond their own egos (and they are creatively weak, too, he claims) who overlay their *own* characters upon Hamlet's in their attempts to discuss him:

"And Hamlet the character has had an especial temptation for that most dangerous type of critic: the critic with a mind which is naturally of the creative order, but which through some weakness in creative power exercises itself in criticism instead. These minds often find in Hamlet a vicarious existence for their own artistic realization. Such a mind had Goethe, who made of Hamlet a Werther; and such had Coleridge, who made of Hamlet a Coleridge; and probably neither of these men in writing about Hamlet remembered that his first business was to study a work of art" (Eliot, 47).

If we believe what Eliot is saying here, and if we *also* hope to prove that the protagonist of *The Waste Land* is a kind of Hamlet, does Eliot himself become “that most dangerous type of critic, with a weakness in creative power”? The argument of my essay is not a popular one, to be sure. For while critics are eager to locate *Hamlet* in other Modern works, few are willing to throw Eliot into his own cauldron of creative criticism on the matter, and perhaps this is due to a difficulty in comparing his highly experimental poem to anything which has come before. Eliot continues:

“Qua work of art, the work of art cannot be interpreted; there is nothing to interpret; we can only criticize it according to standards, in comparison to other works of art; and for “interpretation” the chief task is the presentation of relevant historical facts which the reader is not assumed to know” (Eliot, 47).

If we cannot interpret a work of art on its own merits, as Eliot says, we can *only* criticize it according to standards, and in comparison to other works of art. While I disagree that a work of art cannot be discussed without putting it into a greater historical context, I do agree that greater contexts (standards and comparisons) *always* exist—no work of art is born in a vacuum, not Shakespeare’s art, and certainly not Eliot’s. Critics tend to regard Eliot’s poem in the context of its “new” self-conscious style, following the previous writing period of distanced realism, or else they dissect *The Waste Land*’s direct allusions to classical sources in an attempt to locate meaning (gaining little, I would argue; a more revealing context/comparison might be an indirect, possibly subconscious one).

It is obvious that an author-as-creator must work with a substance already formed. And we know that *Hamlet*, as it fits into a genre of tragedy and revenge plays, is predicated on the plots of tragic and revenge narratives which came before. Even the specific tale of the Danish prince is not new. Shakespeare didn’t invent *Hamlet*. He did, however, create the *consciousness* of Hamlet. Still, Eliot is stuck on the form, rather than the spirit:

“*Hamlet* is a stratification, that it represents the efforts of a series of men, each making what he could out of the work of his predecessors...Furthermore, there are verbal parallels so close to *The Spanish Tragedy* as to leave no doubt that in places Shakespeare was merely revising the text of Kyd...Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, so far as it is Shakespeare’s, is a play dealing with the effect of a mother’s guilt upon her son, and that Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive successfully upon the “intractable” material of the old play...So far from being Shakespeare’s masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure” (Eliot, 49).

That *Hamlet* is a “failure” because Shakespeare imposes his own motive “unsuccessfully” on a preexisting narrative is the *same* argument Eliot makes regarding modern critics who impose their own personalities on the preexisting character of Hamlet. From this we might conclude that Eliot’s opinion of a successful artist is one who either shuns pre-existing works altogether, or somehow internalizes all that has come before without showing evidence of it in the new work. Either way, by his own aesthetic critique, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* would qualify as a failure whether or not one agrees that it is an attempt at rewriting *Hamlet*. I will return to Eliot’s essay at the end of my own, but for now let us regard the similarities between Eliot’s poem and the “failure” that is *Hamlet*.

Hamlet and The Waste Land are Similar in Structure

Both the play and the poem are written in five tension-building “acts”. A quick review of plot structure by act: *Hamlet*, Act I, introduces the ghost of Hamlet’s father, the murdered

king (also named Hamlet). In Act II, various characters speculate upon the curious (mad) state of Hamlet, each drawing their own conclusion. In Act III, the “plays the thing,” and Shakespeare inserts a play within the play. Hamlet acts as secondary playwright, inserting his own lines into *Murder of Gonzago/The Mousetrap*, a device which allows him to expose the guilty conscience of the usurping king, Claudius. After the play, Hamlet confronts his mother (Queen Gertrude) about her wanton betrayal and he mistakenly kills Polonius. In Act IV, Hamlet is sent to England with his school chums/spies (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) under Claudius’ order that he will be killed. Ophelia, rejected by Hamlet, and grieving the death of her father (Polonius) goes (truly) mad. Laertes (Ophelia’s brother) and Claudius contrive to murder Hamlet. In Act V, Hamlet returns from England, and everybody dies.

The Waste Land is a poem in five parts, or, I argue, a tragic one-man play in five acts. Each act builds upon the last, yet includes its own particular framework. Character, dialog, scene and performative theatricality are central components of stage plays, and are at the heart, too, of *The Waste Land*. Act I is The Burial of the Dead. The land is dead, the trees are dead, the people are grieving and/or dead (A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many) There are ghosts, and implied murder (discussed later in this essay). Act II, A Game of Chess, speaks of a kind of queen (The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne), a sexually offensive king (The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced), nervous fretting and strategizing, a dressing down of an Ophelia-ish character and discussion of the burden of children. There is a call to action (HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME). Eliot includes additional nods to Shakespeare, “Those are pearls that were his eyes” (from *The Tempest*), and “O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—”. The act concludes with a pointed line from *Hamlet*, that of Ophelia, (Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night). Act III, The Fire Sermon, begins at the bank of the river Thames. The speaker sings a sad song and contemplates his father’s death and white bones (Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck / And on the king my father’s death before him / White bodies naked on the low damp ground / And bones cast in a little low dry garret). A dispassionate sex act follows, the speaker then moves to a sea journey, and further existential crisis (I can connect nothing with nothing), and finally references Carthage on fire (burning burning burning). Act IV, Death By Water, is short, and the speaker contemplates a dead sailor decaying under the sea. The speaker urges the reader to remember the dead were once “handsome and tall like you.” Act V, What the Thunder Said, takes us to a stony place of no water, a place of lamentation, memory, death (He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying), and graves (Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel / there is the empty chapel, only the wind’s home). Just before the final prayer, *The Waste Land* concludes with a line from “mad” Hieronymo (Why then Ile fit you), taken from Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, which, as we’ve seen in his critical essay, Eliot assumes to be the forerunner of *Hamlet*.

Hamlet, as a tragedy in five acts is repeated in *The Waste Land*, a tragedy in five parts. That there are striking similarities between the format and movement of both works cannot be overstated, and that Eliot is nodding *directly* to *Hamlet* at least twice in *The Waste Land* (first, with Ophelia’s line, and second with the mad protagonist of *The Spanish Tragedy*) should be enough to warrant a closer inspection of shared themes, motifs, and styles between the two works.

Hamlet and The Waste Land Share a Primary Existential Theme

The encompassing theme of modern British literature (and *The Waste Land*, in particular) may be said to be that of alienation from others and from the self. At a time when the British nation as a whole is reeling from the loss of a generation of men to World War I, its citizens face an additional loss of identity and meaning brought about by rapid industrialization,

mechanization, and bureaucratic sterility. William Barrett describes modern alienation in *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*:

“...man’s feeling of homelessness, of alienation has been intensified in the midst of a bureaucratized, impersonal mass society. He has come to feel himself an outsider even within his own human society. He is trebly alienated: a stranger to God, to nature, and to the gigantic social apparatus that supplies his material wants. But the worst and final form of alienation, toward which indeed the others tend, is man’s alienation from his own self” (Barrett, 35).

As an artistic response to the “new” malaise, Modern writers turn their focus to the theme of alienation by creating individual character consciousness, expressing existentialist thought through internal dialog.

Awareness of this self-conscious consciousness is integral to reading any Modern work, as *The Waste Land* certainly is, but it is also essential when reading *Hamlet*. (I will bracket the popular oedipal readings of both pieces, which, while interesting, do not speak to Modernism specifically). Critic Harold Bloom refers to *Hamlet* as a “poem unlimited,” a poem in its *aesthetic* (rather than plot) value, and unlimited in the sense that Hamlet’s consciousness, his self-questioning/philosophizing (and thus his relevance) would not end, but for his death. In his book, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, Bloom asserts:

“After four centuries, Hamlet remains our world’s most advanced drama, imitated but scarcely transcended by Ibsen, Chekov, Pirandello, and Beckett. You cannot get beyond Hamlet, which establishes the limits of theatricality, just as Hamlet himself is a frontier of consciousness yet to be passed” (Bloom,7).

Whether the play is “successful” according to Eliot’s standards is irrelevant. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare creates the consciousness of a character which persists through the ages, haunting, in particular, those writers seeking to use character consciousness to express the feeling of an entire era. British Modernists looking for an existential literary source for their writing need look no further than the annals of British canon for a singular character consciousness expressing existential angst from the start: “O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew” (from Act I). Similarly, the body of the *The Waste Land* is preceded by a Latin and Greek epigraph from *The Satyricon* of Petronius. Translated to English, it reads: “I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl of Cumae hanging in a jar, and when the boys said to her, Sibyl, what do you want? she replied “I want to die.” And while *The Waste Land*’s speaker may use different voices, the keen reader understands that each voice reiterates the same problem. The tone of both *Hamlet* and *The Waste Land* is one of alienation, sorrow, resentment, and impotence.

Both works end, too, with a plea. In *Hamlet*, the plea is that Hamlet shouldn’t be misunderstood or forgotten (he begs Horatio to tell his story), and he concludes “the rest is silence.” This is not unlike Eliot’s speaker’s conclusion, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” followed by the wink to “mad” Hieronymo, and finally by a call for “the peace which passeth understanding” (his translation of Datta. Dyadhavam. Damyata.) and “peace, peace, peace” (Shantih shantih shantih). For each hero, the “rest” is silence—which can be both understood as the *death* is silence, or as the *remainder* is silence. The concept of silence after a period of long questioning and internal strife is indeed a peaceful thought, and each author finds it a fitting way to end their tragedies, perhaps making them less tragic than they appear on their surfaces. If alienation is a feeling of disjointed existence from within and without, and if the expression of that discomfort happens in the self-consciousness consciousness (through inner and outer dialog), then the silence offered by death is peace. Of

course, Hamlet's greatest fear is that death will not be the end of consciousness—"Aye, there's the rub."

Hamlet and The Waste Land Share Other Existential Motifs

As tragedy plays/poems unlimited, it should be no surprise that the subject of **death**, and the symbols which represent death, are featured throughout both works. From **shadows** (Hamlet: "A dream itself is but a shadow" and Eliot: "Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you") to **drownings** (Hamlet: drownings of Ophelia, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern, and Eliot: the Phoenician Sailor) to **burials** (Hamlet: Ophelia's burial, and Eliot: The Burial of the Dead) to **bones** (Hamlet: Yorick's skull, and Eliot: "Dry bones can harm no one" and "And bones cast in a little low dry garret") to **dust** (Hamlet: "And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" and "Compounded it with dust, whereto 'tis kin," and Eliot: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust") and **graveyards** (Hamlet: Yorick's and Ophelia's graveyard scenes, and Eliot: Death By Water, as well as What the Thunder Said).

Further, both works extensively employ the motif of an "**instigating**" **ghost**. Hamlet's father's ghost rises up to spur on the entire action of the play. This original murder will result in the deaths of nearly every other character. Likewise, there is an original murder and instigating ghost in *The Waste Land*, as Eloise Hay claims in *T.S. Eliot and His Negative Way*:

"This traveler who (we see later in the person of Tiresias) has 'sat by Thebes below the wall/And walked among the lowest of the dead,' is qualified to terrify an old acquaintance encountered in the street, rising up like a ghost and saying:

You who were with me in the ships of Mylae!
That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
Has it begun to sprout?

He insinuates both that a murder has been covered up and that the buried life might be his own. The last line suggests that the buried life, asking to remain buried before, has now risen to confront us all...this voice in Part I charges all those with hypocrisy who deny their roles as 'buriers of the dead and live in hope of rebirth' (Hay, p 57).

Ghosts exist as a confrontation to us all, offering both a warning and a call to action. Hamlet's father's murder foreshadows Hamlet's death (they share the same name), and the father's ghost is a motif which reappears in the deaths of Laertes, Ophelia, Gertrude, Polonius, Hamlet, and Claudius. For both Shakespeare and Eliot, it is not enough to pontificate upon the problem of living and dying. The symbols and signs of death must punctuate every level of the narrative, framing each speaker in memento mori, lest he forget the burden and purpose of his questioning.

Both authors also use persistent **questions** to steer the protagonists' intellectual/spiritual course—a methodology which can be discussed in terms of authorial style—but questions *also* reflect the works' existential drives and serve as motifs to reinforce theme. In *Hamlet* (a work of about four thousand lines), the word "question" is used seventeen times, and there are countless actual questions posed throughout. The most prescient existential question in the English language (or any other) may be Hamlet's "To be, or not to be?" In his book *Hamlet, Prufrock and Language*, Zulfikar Ghose explores the meaning of the famous soliloquy in terms of its value in Modernist texts:

"Hamlet is not contemplating suicide but testing the meaning of life by positing its very opposite, and in his conclusions he is very much like a Beckett character who knowing that life is meaningless realizes that death will not solve anything, for it will not

guarantee the elusive meaning but either prolong the anguish in the after-life ('the dread of something after death... puzzles the will') or, if there is no after-life, make the one life even more absurdly meaningless. And like many of Beckett's characters, Hamlet is obliged to pass the time by talking to himself, now testing one hypothesis, and now another" (Ghose, 62.)

While Ghose is helping our argument by linking the character of Hamlet with Beckett's postmodern and recognizably existential characters from the late 1950s (which fall in step with the philosophy's generally accepted timeline), we see the same existential soliloquy and self-conscious questioning forty years earlier, in the Modern period. In *The Waste Land* (a work of about four *hundred* lines, as opposed to *Hamlet's* four thousand) twenty-two questions are posed, and they aren't incidental questions. Just as Hamlet questions life and meaning itself, Eliot's speaker could be said to be talking to himself when he (in masked voices) asks questions such as "Do you know nothing?" "Are you alive or not?" "What shall we ever do?" "What should I resent?" Questions in *Hamlet* and *The Waste Land* are employed as symbols of the protagonists' self-conscious consciousness, rather than plot-forwarding, practical devices.

It can be no coincidence either, in two works which explore alienation and death, that **madness** surfaces as a motif. Questioning that which others do not question is an alienating force unto itself, and while neither speaker is, in fact, "mad," both Hamlet and Eliot (as the speaker of *The Waste Land*) refer to themselves as such, and are misread as being so. Hamlet goes so far as to specify that "I essentially am not in madness. But mad in craft," and we might believe that Eliot's speaker is mad in a self-consciously similar way (Hieronymo's mad againe). Eliot's voices in *The Waste Land* appear as madness when we unite them within the single consciousness of the poet—this is not an author suffering from split-personalities—like Hamlet, Eliot's madness is madness in *craft*. Calvin Bedient argues that Eliot's original title for the poem, "He Do the Police in Different Voices," taken from Dickens' novel *Our Mutual Friend*, points to the singular consciousness of the *speaker*, regardless of perceived multiplicity:

"In this poem, Eliot's apparent "reluctance to communicate," his apparent ambivalence about being understood (his imitation of Hieronymo in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, who "fits" his despised audience through a deceptive play of many unknown tongues) is part and parcel of his attempt to turn art itself into a deliverance from words, an exercise in asceticism" (Bedient, 36).

Voices, theatricality, and wordplay are all part of the "madness" shared by both Hamlet and Eliot. Both speakers bait their audience, tempting them to question their own sanity as they follow the speaker down the dark hole of their imagination. Bedient continues:

"Why then Ile fit you' implies that the protagonist is meeting and baiting something or someone—is it us?—as a strategist, and is not to be outdone. Hieronymo, in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* was out to delude and kill the villains who hanged his son. Who has hurt the protagonist so direly that he should compare himself to "mad" Hieronymo?" (Bedient, 215).

Bedient concludes that *no one* has wounded Eliot's speaker, though I would argue that the perpetrator is modern society, in addition to the perceived betrayal by women and by time. Madness, whether feigned or felt, is a by-product of questioning, and another symbol of alienation used by both authors.

Disjointed time, too, features heavily in *Hamlet* and *The Waste Land*, as it should in works which ruminate about meaning within the linear confines of existence. From Act I in *Hamlet*, “The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!” Hamlet is expressing an internal and external conflict, where action and meaning, cause and effect are jumbled and misaligned. He recognizes his call (to avenge his father’s death and set time right), just as he recognizes that it is an impossible task. There is no going back, no fix; he cannot re-order time. There are issues of disjointed time in Hamlet’s own appearance in the play, as well. In Act I, he is a university student, of twenty or so. When he returns from England in Act V to chat with the gravedigger, he is thirty. Yet time hasn’t moved within the play more than a few months. Likewise, Eliot’s speaker moves through time and space in an attempt to resolve his internal conflict. In Act I (Burial of the Dead), Eliot begins in the space of memory, nature and youth, then moves quickly to adulthood in urban London. Act II (A Game of Chess) moves from a bedroom of antiquity to a modern pub, where the barkeep announces HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME. In Act III (The Fire Sermon) Eliot moves from a modern river bank to the Unreal City at noon, to the violet hour, whereupon the speaker becomes “I, Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs”. In Act IV (Death By Water), Eliot inverts time as the Phoenician “passed the stages of his age and youth,” and in Act V (What the Thunder Said), Eliot’s speaker, like Hamlet, underscores that time cannot be undone, “The awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract.” Still, like Hamlet, he longs to *unbury* the dead and muses “Only at nightfall, aetherial rumours / Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus.” Both works, in concerning themselves with man’s plight and search for meaning, use skewed time to express the repeating loop, yet unalterable nature of existence.

Fortune personified (as a woman) is another existential motif shared by both works. Both male speakers use their doubt of female constancy to prove that, like a woman, Fortune shows no loyalty, and calamity comes to us all. In Hamlet’s famed soliloquy there are the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” to be suffered, but it is Hamlet’s scene with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Act II) which makes merry with Fortune’s gender:

Hamlet: My excellent good friends! How dost thou Guildenstern? Ah, Rosencrantz!

Good lads, how do you both?

Rosencrantz: As indifferent as children of the earth.

Guildenstern: Happy in that we are not overhappy; on Fortune's cap we are not the very

button.

Hamlet: Nor the soles of her shoe?

Rosencrantz: Neither, my lord.

Hamlet: Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favours?

Guildenstern: Faith, her privates we.

Hamlet: In the secret parts of Fortune? O, most true! She is a strumpet.

Likewise (though not so lasciviously) in *The Waste Land*, Fortune takes the form of Madame Sosotris, the fortune teller, with a “bad cold” and a “wicked pack of cards.” She shows the speaker all that is to come, including the drowned Phoenician Sailor, the one-eyed Merchant, the rocks, and death by water. Inclusion of the concept of chance or fortune in two works which confront the control that man has or doesn’t have over his own life might be anticipated, or at the very least a coincidence, but that both authors additionally *personify* Fortune as a woman to be spoken of in terms of her human frailty (suffering a cold), or her sexuality (her “privates”) is noteworthy.

In a similar vein, both works express the protagonist’s **dissatisfaction with humanity and with women, in particular**. From Hamlet we hear the following phrases: “What a piece

of work is a man!”, “Man delights not me. No, nor woman neither,” and “Frailty, thy name is woman.” In *The Waste Land*, while the narrative is increasingly disjointed, the speaker is no more kind to his fellow humans, and weighs judgment most heavily upon women. Bedient draws out Eliot’s meaning in the section Burial of the Dead:

“This second paragraph develops, by dramatizing, what is implicit in the first one: the protagonist’s piercing disenchantment with human beings as objects of demand and desire, in particular with the waste place of romantic entanglements. The protagonist recalls a fatal moment when he felt cut off from a woman, indeed from all women...” (Bedient, 28)

Additionally, one can read Eliot’s other female characters (including Fortune) as women from *Hamlet*. Marie is a stand-in for Hamlet’s mother, as the Hyacinth Girl is Ophelia. According to Bedient, Eliot’s Marie is based on a real person, Countess Marie Larisch, who wrote a memoir in 1913 titled *My Past: Reminiscences of the Courts of Austria and Bavaria; Together with the True Story of the Events Leading up to the Tragic Death of Rudolph, Crown Prince of Austria*. It is not a far stretch to imagine Eliot using Marie to recall the title *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Bedient delves deeper into Eliot’s perspective on life and women, and draws a clear relationship between Eliot’s speaker in *The Waste Land* and *Hamlet*’s Ophelia:

“The true heroism, for Eliot, was to ‘question’ the Absolute, however overwhelming the task, however incongruous in view of human vanity and abjection. Marie is international, but no heroine. The only true heroism is devotional. Marie is a waif with regard to the metaphysical. Indeed, perforce, since she is a woman: women, Eliot thought, are enemies of the Absolute, as are both society (though society in this poem is mostly women) and time. Women, as Eliot portrays them in *The Waste Land*, are relentlessly self-referenced, whirlpools of vanity, Ophelias on their way down in their own nothingness” (Bedient, 22).

In *Hamlet*, as in *The Waste Land*, women are portrayed as time-consuming, inconsequential materialists, whose very existence threatens the peace of the protagonist. Ophelia is as much a problem to Hamlet for her endless devotion to him as his mother is, for her betrayal of his father. Hamlet seeks answers, he seeks the solitude of his mind, and women interrupt with demands. For Eliot, women detract from the Absolute question, they represent society and the wasteland, a construct from which he is eager to break free.

Despite their innate majesty, both **Elsinore and the wasteland are cesspools of violence, rot and decay**. As Hamlet says most succinctly in Act I, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” The Danish prince stands to inherit the throne, but sees only treachery and debauchery around him. Elsinore is a place of death and dying; it is the location of his father’s murdered ghost, the place where Ophelia drowns, it hosts the grave of poor Yorick, the murder of Polonius, and the stabbing and poisoning deaths of Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet. Existentialism promises that all things beautiful will wither, die, and rot; it questions meaning in the face of this promise. Hamlet-the-Existentialist observes outward models of beauty only to undermine them—he reaffirms their base nature, impermanence, and lack of meaning, as here in Act II:

“...this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory. This most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me then a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.”

Eliot's wasteland exists in the Modern age, yet suffers similar description, from "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land" to "And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief / And the dry stone no sound of water" to "Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn" and, after the stately description of a queen's bedroom in *A Game of Chess*, the line "And still she cried, and still the world pursues / 'Jug Jug' to dirty ears. / And other withered stumps of time / Were told upon the walls." Here, and throughout *The Waste Land*, the speaker sees only ruin in things once majestic. Images of falling towers, burning cities, and rotting corpses pervade the text. This is the philosopher's puzzle and the existentialist's plight, to anticipate the end and question the present in light of that knowledge.

Hamlet and Eliot's speakers are philosophers, critics, and misanthropes. We know from the beginning of the play that Hamlet is a scholar at the university in Wittenberg. We watch him intellectualize every action of every scene by asking questions (as philosophers do), critiquing the behavior of those around him, and condemning the circumstances of their lives. Lest we believe that he holds high aspirations for humanity, he makes clear that he puts little value in humans, with the possible exceptions of his good (dead) father, poor (dead) Yorick, and Horatio (whom he needs to preserve his name as Hamlet lays dying). Hamlet's misanthropy deviates only in its self-serving nature. Likewise, Eliot's speaker uses humans only to cast aspersions upon them, or to use their demise to remind the reader of their irrelevance, and inevitable failings. In his book which surveys the end of humanism in the twentieth-century, Bradley Buchanan specifies Eliot's approach as misanthropic:

"...Eliot often seems to have cast off his common humanity in pursuit of a private, misanthropic goal. Eliot's intellectual development (before his conversion to Anglicanism) is a series of unpleasant encounters with humanistic traditions. Eliot studied but rejected philosophy; he read but mistrusted anthropological accounts of religion, preferring a god whose perfection was undiluted by human traits; he disdained socialism and pragmatism for their focus on human nature" (Buchanan, 64).

Indeed, it is within the individual, misanthropic consciousness that *Hamlet and The Waste Land* share protagonists. Both works *use* the consciousness of a single individual in rebellion against his doomed circumstances to address the overall theme of existential alienation. Shakespeare's Hamlet is larger than life; in the poem unlimited of nearly four thousand lines, Hamlet *speaks* roughly sixteen-hundred of them, and those lines he doesn't speak are still *about* him. The play and its supporting characters circle around their protagonist. According to Bloom, "No one, not even Shakespeare, could curtail Hamlet's largeness of being, but Shakespeare had the audacity to keep Hamlet under some control by immersing us in plays within plays within plays" (Bloom, 21). This could point to another issue with Eliot's critique of the "problems" of *Hamlet*. Where Eliot would prefer to focus on the problem of the *play*, rather than the character, I would argue that there *is* no play without the consciousness of Shakespeare's Hamlet. The play is meaningless but for its role as a vehicle for the reimagined hero. Had plot been paramount in Shakespeare's estimation, surely the literary genius would have taken more liberties with it. In other words, the play's *not* the thing.

Ironically (for subscribers of Eliot's view), *The Waste Land*, too, is but a vehicle for the individual consciousness of Eliot's speaker; the play/poem is *not* the thing. The poem and its supporting characters exist only as fodder for their protagonist. Eliot, like Shakespeare perhaps, attempts to curtail his own largeness of being by wrapping the poem in layers of allusions and put-on voices to distract the reader from being overwhelmed by his personality. Still, according to Bedient, Eliot is place-able in the poem:

“Eliot’s ‘individual character’ remains so much a matter of hints, inferences, obscure grumbles, that, despite the undoubted exaggeration and broadening of the poet’s own qualities, his surrogate, the protagonist, seems to be playing hide-and-seek in his own story. In the process he darts behind the words of others, and his self-portrait is so defensive and at the same time so distanced that it is scribbled over with multiple fugitive disguises. But this only makes the poet/protagonist more representative of the humanity of his time and place” (Bedient, 59).

Their adoption of poses, of soliloquy, and of internal and external performativity suggests that both *Hamlet* and *The Waste Land* find the locus of their existential perspectives in the **theatre of the mind**. The theatricality in the varied voices of both protagonists points to a drama which exists in the mind, rather than on the stage. Hamlet is at one moment wry, then maudlin, then slapstick, then cruel. His personas change as quickly as his temperament, but this is not to say that he is mad—only that he is many, within one. Hamlet is beyond body, beyond object. He is consciousness itself. Ghose emphasizes that Hamlet’s despair is “that he cannot escape the trivial banality of existence, for after the opening statement, his first thought is one more philosophical proposition” (Ghose, 85):

What is a man,
 If his chief good and market of his time
 Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
 But this, he reasons, is unacceptable:
 Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and godlike reason
 To fust in us unused

Hamlet justifies, here, his perpetual questioning as mankind’s *raison d’être*. If he ceases to pontificate, he is no more than a beast. The reader is free to conclude that she, too, must exist for the purpose of exercising her mind. Is this Shakespeare’s intent? To use Hamlet to speak to the collective consciousness of his time? To urge his audience to question their purpose and meaning? And, if so, is this the same provocation Eliot is shaping with his work? It is tempting to read *The Waste Land* as a treatise concerned with a specifically Modern era alienation, of a specific time and place (post World War I, England), however, we mustn’t overlook the individual artist’s claim to express the anxiety of his own soul. In *T.S. Eliot’s Negative Way*, Hay examines the author’s intent, and insists that *The Waste Land* is a personal expression, rather than a universal one:

“A good reading of *The Waste Land* must begin then, with recognition that while it expressed Eliot’s own ‘way’ at the time, it was not intended to lay down a way for others to follow. He did not expect that his prisonhouse would have corridors connecting with everyone else’s. ‘I dislike the word ‘generation’ [he said in ‘Thoughts After Lambeth’], which has been a talisman for the last ten years; when I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land* some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the ‘disillusionment of a generation,’ which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention” (Hay, 50).

Discerning whether the author’s intent is to speak for his generation or only of his private experience may not prove rewarding for generations of readers who have taken solace in Shakespeare’s and Eliot’s words, readers who find kinship with a speaker who is able to name the otherwise unnameable feeling of desolation and despair.

Although the case for Eliot drawing upon (and perhaps rewriting) *Hamlet* in his own poem is, to my eyes, obvious, I will draw this last comparison between the works before pulling again at the thread of Eliot's critical writing: ***Hamlet and The Waste Land share writing styles.*** The very aspects of style in *The Waste Land* which critics find "experimental" (read: Modern), can be found centuries earlier, in *Hamlet*. Both authors use copious **wordplay** to call attention to processes of thought, and to the aesthetic appeal of words themselves. In *Hamlet* we find words **looping** back and forth over themselves, as in Act V, Scene II, when Hamlet readies himself for his end, saying to Horatio: "We defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all." This looping back, this repetition, is a style seen throughout Shakespeare's work and we may call it a "fugue," likening it to the classical music tradition when we are discussing classical literary works, or we may call it "a jazz riff" when speaking of Modern writing. Both ideas are the same. Just as Eliot reminds us that works of art are built on other works of art, that they are "stratified," wordplay by a single author within a body of work is a stratification of his own talent. From Eliot's speaker in the last section we hear: "I have heard the key / Turn in the door once and turn once only / We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison." Similarly, both authors use words to "**play**" in their narratives. The serious subject of the existential crisis finds comic relief when Polonius inquires "What do you read, my lord?" and Hamlet answers, "Words, words words." Eliot chortles, "O O O that Shakespeherian Rag— / It's so elegant / So intelligent." They may not be knee-slappers, but they serve to lighten the mood of otherwise dreary matter.

Finally, and most certainly from *Hamlet* (for I know of no earlier, better, or more famous source), Eliot adopts the use of **soliloquy**, that style of thought spoken aloud (and not as an aside to the audience) for which the Danish prince is famed. *Hamlet* is considered an experimental and modern play (of its time) *primarily* for this stylistic device and, I argue, *The Waste Land* owes its similar reputation for the same reason. Hamlet delivers seven soliloquies over the course of the play's five acts, and Eliot's protagonist (Eliot in vocal disguises) delivers the *entire* five-act poem in spoken thought. *The Waste Land* is a single soliloquy, spoken from the protagonist's self-conscious consciousness. The audience may be listening or deaf or absent. It makes no difference. For, if we are to believe Eliot's claim that he is not speaking *to* his generation or *for* his generation, and that he speaks only of himself, we can interpret the soliloquy as being spoken *to* himself, the same way Hamlet is often portrayed, talking to himself upon an empty stage. If we read *The Waste Land* in this way, we may give credit to Eliot for succeeding where Shakespeare "failed." Eliot has taken the offending play out of *Hamlet*, and left the prince's speeches.

Let us return now to Eliot's critique of *Hamlet*, and the issue of the "objective correlative," and examine *The Waste Land* in light of it:

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked... and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear... Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him" (Eliot, 50).

We might unravel Eliot's argument in several ways: we can assert that Hamlet's disgust is *larger* than his mother (and not occasioned by it; that, in fact, she is only incidental to the angst he experiences as an intellectual, and that what Eliot is pointing to as a failure of plot is not laziness on the author's part, but the protagonist's perennial state of mind which precedes plot), we can point to Hamlet's "quintessence of dust" phrase and assert that he is quite *capable* of locating and "expressing" his feelings concerning the failings of mankind, or we can refute Eliot's very first claim, and *dismiss* the necessity of an objective correlative altogether. Why do we need a specific object, situation, or chain of events in order to evoke emotion? We are already in a situation: the human condition. Our object is our consciousness. Our chain of events is the persistence of our breathing. Further, using Eliot's argument against his own work, does *The Waste Land's* evoked crisis of emotion flounder, or does it rest solidly upon an objective correlative? What is Eliot's (as the protagonist) "situation"? He is many voices, railing against humanity. What is Eliot's specific "object"? He is obsessed with water, to be sure, but does imagined water count as an object? It exists only in his consciousness. What is Eliot's "chain of events"? We can only describe them as images from the past and present, moving across the screen of his mind. They are not causal, and there is little to correlate them, other than thematically. Man lives, man destroys, man withers, man dies. Hamlet says this before Eliot. Does Eliot say it better? Perhaps by removing the "play" from *Hamlet*, Eliot allows the reader to submerge themselves in the protagonist's consciousness. Perhaps there is more intimacy offered in Eliot's *The Waste Land*. I would argue that without the trappings of the play, however, Eliot's work appears as a self-conscious one man show. We cannot know the speaker by the players around him because he *is* all the players around him. Establishing (rather than imagining) a world "without" may be essential to creating sympathy for the protagonist's world "within." And perhaps the world *without* is *Hamlet's* best objective correlative. Ghose offers another answer to Eliot when he says, "It has been stated that *Hamlet* is the objective correlative of literature" (Ghose, 85). Indeed, it may have been the one Eliot was using when composing *The Waste Land*. I doubt Eliot would complain about the argument I have laid out here, but for the assertion that he does the voices of himself too clearly. He is, as critics point out, so clearly "Eliot." That *Hamlet* is visible through *The Waste Land*, however, would undoubtedly please him. In his essay of 1920, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot writes:

"We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."

Does a Modern or historical Hamlet assert himself vigorously in *The Waste Land*? I believe so, and will give Eliot's younger self the final word in this essay, keeping in mind the poem he will write in two years, and his later claims (as they contradict his early imperative) that *The Waste Land* is not of or about his generation, or about anything other than his own experience of disillusion. Here is what Eliot believes *before* taking up his existential experiment:

"...the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order...No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead

poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.”

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