

Compare and contrast the way writers convey an air of pessimism in the openings of the texts – [The Wasteland and Waiting for Godot].

The two texts, 'The Waste Land' and 'Waiting for Godot' both convey an air of pessimism within their openings due to the modernist and existentialist views of both the writers. 'The Waste Land' – Eliot's vision of a contemporary predicament, one of natural erotic and spiritual aridity which seems to transcend the barriers of historical time, or natural and geographical boundaries does not depict just the sickness of the land itself; on the contrary it is a metaphor for something more powerful and complex – we are dealing with the human condition – which Eliot reveals lacks focus and has ironically dissolved into 'fragments' resulting in a 'heap of broken images'. T.S. Eliot was a modernist poet, who questioned contemporary literary values of life after the First World War. Modernism thrived in the periods between the two World Wars as it was a time of great difficulty since the conflict created many pessimistic beliefs amongst the civilians. There was not much optimism as to improvement of mankind and this resulted in the disintegration and alienation of the modern self through crisis. Similarly, the poem purports to open up cracks in culture, to show the underlying fault lines and its implications are also to unsettle the reader.

Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' is an absurd play, because at times it is difficult to discern if there is a plot at all, and at other times, the play seems incredibly profound. The essence of existentialism, which is most prominent in this play, concentrates on the concept of the individual's freedom of choice, as opposed to the belief that humans are controlled by a pre-existing omnipotent being, such as God. Beckett believes that humans only exist and nothing else. In order for existence to become a life it must have a purpose and Beckett believes humans do not have a purpose. Everything we do is purely to pass the time between birth and death. The play is a tragicomedy and is for the majority of the time rather morose and dark, creating a pessimistic image of life. The few characters and sparse surroundings are used to exaggerate the view that humans exist only to pass time. Vladimir and Estragon never progress through life but go round in circles in their conversation, actions and encounters with other characters. They are representative of humankind and the play is a microcosm of society.

'The Waste Land' is a spiritual journey, which begins with an April opening that questions our conditioned expectation of the seasons. We see the natural attitude that April heralds the spring and is responsible for bloom is distorted. The adjectives used to describe this season indicate that nothing flourishes here – because the 'roots,' the very foundation of the vegetation is described as being 'dull' – a word which seems to stand out from the rest because the 'l' sounds enact the idea of lyrically sighing. Paradoxically, life seems to struggle out of death. Eliot expresses this idea well by the physical imagery he uses to describe the landscape: 'lilacs.' This is a symbol of freshness and vigour and it is bred 'out of the dead land.' So the land in turn reflects the sapped vitality of its inhabitants. We see that there is a lack of regeneration and fertility through the deficiency of flourishing vegetation in the Wasteland and this conveys an air of pessimism as there is no possibility of hope being created since nothing is able to grow in this land. The hyacinth girl with her 'wet hair' and very succulent lushness of her flowers are sexually symbolic and therefore she has expectations for growth but her words which are childlike and self-pitying convey her disappointment because her lover has 'failed' her. So the expectations that love should grow and flourish is shattered by the 'silence,' creating a note of finality. There is definitely something lacking in the relationship, which results in a state where the people of the Wasteland are 'neither living nor dead' which then places them all in a limbo of the half alive whose life cycle can never be harmonised with the natural cycle (of growth). Therefore, where the two should harmonise they jar

discordantly and this results in the many negative activities going on in the wasteland adding to the pessimistic feelings expressed in the poem .

By looking at the state of the land it is evident that no spiritual being has come to promote regeneration within the Wasteland. The expectation that the corpse in 'The Burial of the Dead' might 'sprout' or perhaps 'bloom this year' comes to stand as a metaphor for rebirth and growth which is not physical but spiritual. This expectation though is not fulfilled but instead is sardonically dismissed. We are instead presented with an image opposing the idea of growth: the image of the dying Tristan who shows us that the true potential of relationships is not fulfilled and instead the relationship comes to a tragic end because love alone is not enough to provide the answers for a spiritually rewarding life. The use of assonance, the 'e' sounds, in Tristan's last words – "Oed und leer das Meer" help to create the idea of the 'wide' sea ironically filled with vast emptiness. Earlier, we were warned by the god-like voice not to take this life, but the language there was very covert and the 'fear' that he would 'show...in a hand full of dust' suggests an association with death, as the image of dust once again questions our own mortality. These people however, cannot 'connect' or comprehend the meaning and so have taken it to mean only the idea of death, rather than using the information to question the lives that they lead now.

Waiting for Godot - fertility

The lack of fertility is expressed in 'Waiting for Godot' through the fact that there are no female characters at all. This means that there is no real chance of new life being brought into the universe and the natural cycle of life is tampered with. Beckett claimed that he Moreover, Estragon and Vladimir seek sexual pleasure through hanging themselves off a tree: "What about hanging ourselves?" showing the sexual depravation faced by the protagonists. They prefer to indulge in suicidal methods to attain sexual pleasure rather than actual intercourse, through which some optimism could also be brought into the play with a sense of fertility and regeneration. Yet, there is no renewal or rebirth of human life and this suggests a lack of hopefulness within the play.

In addition, the image of the 'fog' in 'The Waste Land' is symbolic of the confusion felt by the 'London crowd,' people with a spectral dimension who flow aimlessly. Their 'sighs of boredom' amount to nothing, but a form of damnation, which Eliot presents as ghost-like. Therefore, in this section the imagery clearly emphasises the idea that their existence is a very 'unreal' one, lacking focus. This also explains their confusion and inability to piece information, valuable for their spiritual growth. Stephen Coote highlights that in the wasteland, "Life is death and death is life." This can be seen to be very true, especially in the case of the citizens, as they are not actually living their lives but merely existing on the basic needs necessary for their lives to continue. The people could be described as being soulless which is equivalent to 'death' and therefore living is also seen to be dead. The futility of the lives led by the citizens, that can be seen here, shows the many difficulties people faced after the First World War, claiming that despair was the only honest response to the chaotic universe, admitting defeat and leading bleak lives with a deficiency of love and spirituality. Their pessimistic attitude to the world and to each other is communicated through the ineffectuality of their behaviour.

Waiting in 'Waiting for Godot' induces boredom as a theme. Vladimir and Estragon constantly ponder and ask questions, many of which are rhetorical or are left unanswered. Existentialists expressed clearly that human beings can never hope to understand why they are here. The tramps' repetitive inspection of their empty hats perhaps symbolizes mankind's vain search for answers within the spiritual and moral vacuum of a universe. Existentialists further declared that

human beings require a rational basis for their lives but are unable to achieve one, and thus human life is a futile passion. Estragon and Vladimir attempt to put order into their lives by waiting for a Godot who never arrives. They continually subside into the futility of their situation, reiterating the phrase "Nothing to be done." Vladimir also resolves with the notion that life is futile, or nothing is to be done at the beginning, replying "All my life I've tried to put it from me... And I resumed the struggle." David Parfitt claims that this is a play "...in which nothing seems to happen" and this is true as Beckett deliberately employs the repetition of themes, speech and action to highlight the futility of life. Gogo and Didi frequently repeat phrases, such as, "Nothing to be done". Their actions consist of ritually inspecting their hats. Nothingness is what the two tramps are essentially fighting against and the reason why they talk.

Beckett conveys a universal message that pondering the impossible questions that arise from waiting, cause pain, anxiety and inactivity. Both Vladimir and Estragon ponder suicide, by hanging themselves from the tree, but are unable to act due to anxiety, as Estragon states, "Don't let's do anything. It's safer." Anxiety could explain the inactivity of both Estragon and Vladimir as they both are aware of the different choices they can make but are hesitant, anxious and generally inactive:

"Estragon: Well, shall we go?"

Vladimir: Yes, let's go.

They do not move."

Beckett infers that humans 'pass time' by habit or routine to cope with the existentialist dilemma of the dread or anxiety of their existence. This shows the futility of the lives and conversations that the protagonists of the play have as they are continually stagnating and there is no progress throughout their existence on Earth. The process is very cyclical and hence an air of pessimism is conveyed through the fruitless survival led by Vladimir and Estragon.

Throughout 'The Waste Land', various prophetic figures are alluded to, including the Sybil, Ezekiel, Tiresias, Buddha and the thunder. Madame Sosostris is an ironic version of the prophetic figure and is an example of the lack of spirituality in the Wasteland, especially since she "had a bad cold" exemplifying that she is only human and mocks her abilities to read the future. Madame Sosostris conducts the most outrageous form of 'reading' possible, transforming a series of vague symbols into predictions, many of which will come true in succeeding sections of the poem. She claims, "Fear death by water," that comes true in Part 4 of the poem – "Death by water." We see that water not only brings salvation to people of the wasteland but also death, showing nature's ability to take people's lives. The clairvoyant also indicates the nature of the wasteland, "I see crowds of people walking around in a ring," illustrating the pointless and futile lives led by the people of the wasteland and also the image of the ring means that there is no escape from the cycle of death imparting the idea that there is no hope in the wasteland.

Eliot transforms the traditional tarot pack to serve his purposes. Similarly, the clairvoyant undergoes a transformation in accordance with her needs: fraud, vulgarity, and cheap mysticism. The phoney psychic Madame Sosostris simply states what she sees and there is not enough insight to apprehend the meaning of "the drowned Phoenician sailor" or "the Wheel". Eliot shows this to be the behaviour of those "who expect nothing," feelings which come from an indifference towards life itself. Western men had exhausted their spiritual powers; some rushed around looking for replacements in magic, as we can see with Madame Sosostris but others also turned to eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism that they felt offered peace and salvation. This view is repeated by Stephen Coote when he states that the wasteland mainly focuses on the, "Death of

God.” This can be seen in the way that people believed in magic and consulted a psychic rather than turning to God. However, I believe that this is not entirely true as Eliot mentioned the three Da’s in the latter part of the poem where regeneration occurs and the belief of God comes into focus in the people’s hearts following Eastern religions showing that universally a slow change is occurring. This will soon spread to the others who will spiritually strive within the wasteland, giving the reader some hope that life will continue on a positive note, eradicating the air of pessimism that is prevalent throughout the poem. Eliot’s mother was also a poet, interested in more visionary and prophetic poetry as she was obsessed with religious truths. Whilst his mother’s principal poetic direction was the extraordinary exertions of seers and prophets, Eliot chose to write about the lack of spirituality of people within the wasteland because they turned to a fortune-teller for help although she has no connection with God. This is a portrayal of his cynical opinions, using Madam Sosostriis as an example, of the life people lead in the time period between the two World Wars.

Beckett seems to portray the incomprehensibility and irrationality of faith or hope and perhaps feels advocating 'a leap of faith' limits the individual's choice. Despite Beckett's denial of Godot's symbolism to God, Godot does have a strong connection towards a god of some kind. Godot could be a hero, a religious symbol, a role model but most importantly a symbol of hope. The more Gogo and Didi converse about this supposed Mr. Godot, the more importance this god-like figure or symbol acquires. Vladimir illustrates the absurdity and the delusive nature of hope, as he has premonitions of Godot's arrival: "Listen! ... Hssst! (... They listen, huddled together.) I thought it was ... Godot. ... I could have sworn I heard shouts." Gogo replies more realistically, "Pah! The wind in the reeds." Absurdity in the play is a by-product of their metaphysically bizarre condition. However, the fact that Godot still has not arrived throughout the course of the play, shows the lack of a higher spiritual present to sort out Vladimir's and Estragon's problems. In fact, this increases the pessimism within the play since Gogo and Didi have made no progress throughout the whole play and end at the same place as they started presenting their stagnating positions, which religion or a supreme being does not help to change.

In conclusion, the play and the poem both display a bleak view of life and all the characters epitomise all of mankind showing the full range of human emotions. In Godot, the pessimistic view is that they cannot escape waiting for Godot, from each other or from their situation. The optimistic view of the play shows a range of human emotion and the need to share experiences alongside the suffering of finite existence; governed by the past, acting in the present and the uncertainty of the future. On reflection in 'The Waste Land', we see that our lives are conditioned by hope and if we yearn to become more spiritual and religious, the negativity of the wasteland portrayed by Eliot's pessimistic tone would soon disappear. The texts, although, express disappointment, disillusionment, and shows desiccated human relationships, also show us some promise of an escape from these things.