

T.s. eliot and his objective correlative versus shakespeare



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T. S. Eliot's famous poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* shares many correlating themes with William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Despite their evident similarities in style, Eliot criticizes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in his essay *Hamlet and His Problems*, calling it "a problem which proved too much for him" (Eliot, 184). Eliot said that the main theme, the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, was a failure because Hamlet's feelings were too strong to be stirred solely by his mother. Eliot called his own idea of having to have a set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events, be the formula for a particular emotion, objective correlative. "The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*" (Eliot, 183). *Hamlet* is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is "in excess of the facts as they appear" (Eliot, 183). Although he claims that Shakespeare's inability to fulfill the criterion of objective correlative ruins *Hamlet*, Eliot's own piece of work fails to meet this same standard. In trying to make his argument, Eliot's criticisms of *Hamlet* actually further connect it to his own writing, confounding his intentions. The inability to meet the objective correlative is just another characteristic, along with the themes of the effects of paralysis, a diseased world and Hell, existentialism, and death, that *Hamlet* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* have in common. *Hamlet* is a paragon of paralysis. He is an extremely intelligent and analytical character. He constantly seeks answers for situations but in his search he produces more questions than answers. The combination of his natural proneness to anxiety and his perception of mankind's limitations stall his action. *Hamlet* is paralyzed by the discovery of his mother's sexual nature as well as his father's murder at the beginning of the play. His decisiveness is further hindered when he realizes that avenging

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his father's murder could have a severe impact not only on his own soul, but also on those closest to him and even the state of Denmark. The main character of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Prufrock, shares many characteristics with Hamlet. He is sharp and self-doubting to such an extreme that it inhibits his actions. His paralysis is contemporary, its sources being both sexual and social anxieties. Prufrock is a modern tragic hero because his concerns are real yet pathetic. His problems solely affect him, unlike societies' traditional tragic heroes whose actions affect justice and multitudes of people. Prufrock is quick to admit his difference from the traditional tragic hero Hamlet, "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" (111). He does not carry the burden of influence that Prince Hamlet does. Despite their deviant concerns and altered tragic hero classifications, Prufrock and Hamlet are both plagued by an inability to act. The presence of the ghost in Hamlet is a supernatural omen pointing out that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I. iv. 90). Following his encounter with his father's ghost, Hamlet becomes increasingly aware of the affect of Claudius's moral corruption on Denmark. Hamlet depicts the earth as a "quintessence of dust" and "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors" (II. ii. 288). His description of the world as a prison, "a goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o'th'worst" (II. ii. 38), conveys his feelings of entrapment on earth. He longs for death to end his suffering but his fear of Hell prevents his suicide. He is forced to endure the pain of life so he doesn't have to suffer for eternity. Hamlet concludes in his famous "to be or not to be" (III. i. 60) soliloquy that no one would choose to withstand the pain of life if they were not afraid of what followed death. Like Hamlet, Prufrock hates the world as he sees it. Prufrock lives in a

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fragmented, barren world. His description of the city where he is from illustrates its sterility, " streets that follow like a tedious argument" (8) and " lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows" (72). The skyline is, " like a patient etherized upon a table" (3) and " yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the windowpanes" (17) fills the air. He uses these descriptions to express the absence of God in the world and implausible resurrection. His travels take the reader on a downward ride from the skyline all the way to the ocean floor, each descent stirring more painful emotions. Prufrock hints through a series of images that what comes after death will be worse, echoing Hamlet's fear of damnation. The disarray of Hamlet's surroundings eventually lead him to develop an existentialist view of the world even though he retains his Christian beliefs. What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals. And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me, yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (II. ii. 288) In this scene he creates a glorified picture of the earth and humans and then diminishes their value. He does this to generate a sense of the great gap between what appears to be and what really is. He becomes conscious of this gap when his " seeming virtuous queen" (I. v. 46) mother's sensual nature is revealed. Like Hamlet's, Prufrock's environment is unbearable to him. He loses all faith in the existence of God due to the extent of his disgust. Sexuality plays a significant role in the lifestyle of this society but it does not provide renewal. Instead of having relationships based on emotional connections people choose to spend " restless nights in one-night cheap hotels"(6). Even the <https://assignbuster.com/ts-eliot-and-his-objective-correlative-versus-shakespeare/>

shy, self-doubting Prufrock takes part in these sensually driven affairs. “ And I have known the arms already, known them all- / Arms that are braceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)” (62-64). God’s absence in Prufrock’s world causes him to embrace the physical aspects of life. Hamlet becomes obsessed with the idea of death after his father’s murder. The inevitability of death fascinates him. He often makes comments referring to every human’s eventual death and decay. “ We eat all creatures else to eat us, and we eat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service – two dishes, but to one table” (IV. iii. 21). Hamlet delivers this address to the king shortly after the murder of Polonius to describe the balancing effect of death. Death brings the equality of all people for worms take no notice of the status of their meal. Hamlet’s discovery of Yorick’s skull further illustrates his fascination of the physicality of death. “ Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft” (V. i. 162). Prufrock has an intense anxiety of aging and death. He creates a delusion that he has plenty of time left. He repeatedly reassures himself that “ indeed there will be time” (23). Nevertheless, he is extremely self-conscious about his signs of aging. “ With a bald spot in the middle of my hair – (They will say: ‘ How his hair is growing thin!’)” (40-41). Prufrock’s awareness of his bald spot is much like Hamlet’s fascination with Yorick’s skull, it is his physical reminder that death is eminent. Hamlet and The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock both fail to fulfill the objective correlative. T. S. Eliot is correct that Hamlet’s discovery of his mother’s true nature is not significant enough to meet the objective correlative. At no point in the play is a reason that can account for Hamlet’s passionate behavior revealed.

Neither can the main theme of Prufrock, the hopelessness and sterility of the <https://assignbuster.com/ts-eliot-and-his-objective-correlative-versus-shakespeare/>

modern world, be accounted for by any single object in the poem. Yet, both pieces of writing make sense and effectively convey the author's themes. How can this be when according to Eliot, "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an objective correlative" (Eliot, 183)? The bottom line is that objective correlative cannot work in all cases. It is an interesting, but flawed idea. Every emotion cannot be linked to a set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events because the human mind is boundless; it would be impossible to find a specific cause for every thought and feeling. Both parallel themes and this insufficiency of Eliot's objective correlative are what tie Hamlet and The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock together. Works Cited Eliot, T. S. "Hamlet and His Problems." Hamlet, A Norton Critical Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992. Eliot, T. S. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. London, 1917. Shakespeare, William. Hamlet, A Norton Critical Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992.