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The Literary Portrayal of London Before and After the Blitz

“London opens to you like a novel itself. It is divided into chapters, the chapters into scenes, the scenes into sentences; it opens to you like a series of rooms, door, passage, door. Mayfair to Piccadilly to Soho to the Strand,” - Anna Quindlen, *Imagined London: A Tour of the World's Greatest Fictional City*

Literature is the backbone of humanity. It is a powerful tool that revives the forgotten past, as well as celebrates the cultural diversity that exists across the globe. London, for instance, is the heart of outstanding literature. Its reputation stems from the fact that it is home to literary icons such as William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, and many more. As encapsulated by the quote above, London brims with stories, which are told by the aforementioned authors. The city is rich in history, with tales seeping through every corner. Besides its eye-catching landmarks and historic hotspots, London is also known for its involvement in the Second World War. East London, in particular, was one of Germany's primary targets, and due to this, it was heavily affected by the Blitz, a notorious German bombing campaign against the United Kingdom in the early 1940s. As a result, this has left a monumental mark on British history, and, in turn, has been captured by several English authors over the years, further exhibiting their individual perspectives on the mishap. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the ways in which London is depicted before and after the Blitz by way of analyzing two poems: “Composed

upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802” by William Wordsworth and “Little Gidding” by T.S. Eliot. The analysis will compare and contrast the respective authors’ use of themes, structure, and literary language as a means of telling the story of London in two different eras.

Wordsworth’s sonnet, “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802,” is a fine example of romantic poetry, in the sense that the theme centers around the appreciation of nature. In the first three lines, Wordsworth makes use of hyperbole when he says, “Earth has not any thing to show more fair: / Dull would he be of soul who could pass by / A sight so touching in its majesty,” (Wordsworth, lines 1-3). To elaborate, he claims that he has caught a glimpse of the most majestic scenery in London when he refers to the Westminster Bridge as “a sight so touching in its majesty,” (Wordsworth, lines 3). This further demonstrates an exaggerated tone, as well as sets the scene for the remainder of the poem, as the reader now knows what to expect. The central theme appears once again in lines 4-5, where Wordsworth describes the morning. “This City now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning; silent and bare,” (Wordsworth, lines 4-5). In line 4, Wordsworth creates an imagery of clothing, as well as introduces a simile and an example of personification, when he elucidates that London encapsulates the beauty of the morning “like a garment,” (Wordsworth, line 4). However, the following line is contradictory, as a paradox is present when he describes the morning as “bare,” (Wordsworth, line 5). The contrast exists when Wordsworth draws a comparison between the city being clad by the pure and unadorned morning. In fact, as the poem progresses, the reader learns that what London truly wears is the “smokeless air,” (Wordsworth, line 8), further gaining an appreciation for the natural beauty of the city. Furthermore, Wordsworth uses minimal words to

express his emotions in line 5, which conveys the idea that he is speechless and awestruck by the serene vision that has been bestowed upon him. “The beauty of the morning; silent and bare,” (Wordsworth, line 5). In addition, the usage of the words “silent” and “bare” creates a peaceful and tranquil mood, which allows the reader to bask in the calm atmosphere of London that has been painted by Wordsworth.

While Wordsworth’s sonnet focuses on the more positive aspects of London, Eliot’s poem does the exact opposite. “Little Gidding” is an exemplary wartime piece, which conveys the central theme of destruction of life through the lens of nature and its elements. Eliot’s poem opens with an excess of natural imagery. For example, the first two lines begin with, “Ash on an old man’s sleeve / Is all the ash the burnt roses leave,” (Eliot, lines 1-2). Given the context of the poem, the use of the word “ash” in line 1 instantly paints a picture of the Blitz. This clearly establishes an imagery of destruction, which allows the reader to gain insight into how widespread the bombings were, which, in turn, left a mark on the public. Furthermore, in line 2, Eliot makes use of the phrase “burnt roses” to highlight the terrorizing impact of the bombings. As a matter of fact, roses are considered a symbol for hope. Hence, in this case, “burnt roses” mark the death of hope. Moreover, it sets a rather morbid tone, which helps the reader understand the severity and extremity of the bombings, and its impact on those who lived through it. Consequently, it can be claimed that the theme of destruction of life through nature holds true in the first two lines. The presence of natural imagery is further observed through repetition. To elaborate, Eliot repeats the phrase, “This is the death of ...” at the end of each stanza, and ends with one of the natural elements. For instance, in line 8, he claims that the remnants of the bombings - such as the “ash

on an old man's sleeve," (Eliot, line 1) and the "dust in the air suspended," (Eliot, line 3) - mark the "death of air," (Wordsworth, line 8). Eliot consistently does this throughout the poem, when he says "This is the death of earth," (Eliot, 16) and "This is the death of water and fire," (Eliot, line 24). In these examples, he utilizes natural imagery, once again. However, the inclusion of the four elements symbolizes how life and death are inevitable, as well as portray the idea that nature is powerful enough to not only create but also destroy life. In addition, it symbolizes how life and death are inevitable. As a result, this perfectly ties in with the central theme of destruction of nature through the perspective of the four elements. Therefore, through the contrasting themes between both poems, it can be claimed that Wordsworth and Eliot had significantly different perspectives on the city of London, seeing as they were both written during different time periods and under juxtaposing circumstances.

The structure of Wordsworth's poem can be described as formal and traditional, seeing as it consists of a variety of different poetic features. To begin with, it is a sonnet, meaning that it is one stanza and 14 lines long, and follows iambic pentameter. According to Arunodoy Bhattacharya, sonnets were extremely popular during the Romantic era, which originated in Europe and lasted from 1800 to 1850. Not only is this form of poetry unique, but it also supports the theme of Wordsworth's work, which is the appreciation of nature. To elaborate, the format of the poem further emphasizes the romantic elements that it contains, such as the author's deep admiration for the city, as well as consistent descriptive imagery. A poetic technique that is featured in Wordsworth's sonnet is enjambment. Upon analyzing the poem, there is an absence of a closing punctuation mark in lines 2, 4, 6 and 9. This signifies the fact that Wordsworth

intended on creating a freely-flowing piece, allowing the reader to be able to breeze through the poem, as opposed to being stuck at the end of each line. Consequently, this allows the reader to easily deduce the author's thought process. Moreover, in terms of the rhyme, the poem follows the classic ABBAABBA-CDCDCD format, making it a Petrarchan sonnet. Therefore, the structure of the poem complements its context, as well as the overarching meaning.

On the other hand, the structure of Eliot's poem differs from that of Wordsworth's, specifically in terms of the rhyme scheme and length. For the most part, "Little Gidding" follows an ABC-ABC rhyme scheme, giving it a song-like effect. Alongside establishing an overall melodious mood, the sing-songy nature of the poem also dramatizes the conflict of destruction of life. However, after line 35, there is a drastic shift in the rhyme scheme. From resembling a song, it changes to a narration, which puts the remainder of the poem into perspective. Moreover, Eliot's use of narration in the second half allows the reader to reflect on his interaction with the newfound ghost, further contributing to the theme of destruction of nature. Overall, in this case, Eliot's carefully chosen structure for his poem gives the reader the opportunity to delve deeper into his experience and perspective on the Blitz.

In essence, the objective of these poems is to explore life in London before and after the Blitz, as well as its impact as both authors write from the point of view of Britain. Despite the fact that Eliot is an American author, the reader can tell that his emotions were personally affected by the series of bombings, which is further reflected in his eloquent style of writing. On the one hand, Wordsworth's sonnet focused primarily on the appreciation of nature before the Blitz. He was

able to do so by way of including hyperbolic diction, descriptive imagery, as well as a variety of other literary devices. Through this, he holds the reputation of being the quintessential nature poet, and does justice to the Romantic era through his writing. Meanwhile, Eliot's poem focused on a more morbid topic - the destruction of nature through the four elements. He established the fact that nature can both create and destroy life. In conclusion, through the central idea of nature, these poems help the reader gain insight into the state of London, as well as how both authors perceived the city before and after the Blitz.

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