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The Theme of Alienation in Modernist Literature: A Comparative Study of T.S. Eliot and Franz Kafka

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Abstract

Modernist literature, shaped by the disillusionment of the early twentieth century, frequently portrays alienation as the defining human condition. This paper compares the representation of alienation in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. It analyzes how both authors use fragmentation, symbolism and existential imagery to depict the loss of faith, meaning and identity in the modern world. By contrasting Eliot's spiritual desolation with Kafka's psychological absurdity, the paper highlights how modernism articulates a crisis of self in an era of mechanization and moral decay (Spurr 25;).

Keywords: Modernism, Alienation, T.S. Eliot, Franz Kafka, Existentialism, Absurdity, Modern Society, Fragmentation, Spiritual Crisis.

Introduction

The twentieth century was an age of rupture an era defined by the collapse of faith, the disintegration of moral certainties and the redefinition of human identity (Nietzsche 108). The optimistic narratives of progress and divine order that characterized the nineteenth century disintegrated under the pressure of industrial capitalism, mechanized warfare and the secularization of thought (Lukács 12). The First World War (1914–1918) dealt a final, devastating blow to the ideal of Western humanism, leaving behind a world spiritually exhausted and intellectually fragmented (Joyce 41). As Europe descended into moral and political crisis, writers, artists and philosophers began to probe the new dimensions of alienation that emerged from this disillusionment. The sense of displacement geographical, cultural and psychological became the central motif of what would later be termed Modernism (Spurr 27). Modernism was both a rebellion and a reinvention. It rejected the stable, omniscient narratives of Victorian realism and turned inward, toward subjectivity, fragmentation and multiplicity of meaning. Its art was the mirror of a shattered world. Modernist writers sought to represent consciousness in flux, to expose the anxiety and absurdity of living without metaphysical certainty (Camus 29). The traditional coordinates of identity religion, nation and family no longer anchored the individual. In this vacuum of meaning, alienation became not just a social condition but an existential reality. The modern self was isolated, incoherent and estranged, condemned to wander through the ruins of a once-coherent civilization. In this landscape of loss, two figures stand as profound chroniclers of

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modern alienation: T.S. Eliot and Franz Kafka. Though separated by geography, language and temperament Eliot writing from the heart of Anglo-American modernism, Kafka from the periphery of the Austro-Hungarian Empire they converge in portraying the modern individual as spiritually exiled and psychologically divided. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is a poetic map of desolation, depicting a world where tradition has crumbled and faith has turned to dust (Eliot 14). Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), by contrast, internalizes alienation within the human body itself, transforming the protagonist Gregor Samsa into a monstrous insect whose grotesque metamorphosis literalizes the dehumanizing forces of modern existence (Kafka 7–9).

Eliot's poetry arises from the crisis of belief and the longing for spiritual redemption; Kafka's fiction emerges from the crisis of communication and the absurdity of human isolation. Eliot's alienation is cultural and theological the anguish of a civilization that has forgotten the sacred; Kafka's is existential and psychological the torment of a consciousness trapped in the absurd machinery of modern life (Kafka 18). Yet beneath their differences lies a shared awareness of disintegration, a recognition that the modern world has severed the bonds between self and society, language and meaning, body and soul (Spurr 33). *The Waste Land* was published at the height of the postwar malaise, when the horrors of mechanized warfare had exposed the fragility of progress. Its fragmented structure, multilingual allusions and kaleidoscopic voices embody the collapse of coherence itself. The poem's opening line, "April is the cruellest month," inverts the classical symbol of spring's renewal into an emblem of sterile regeneration (Eliot 37). The speaker's journey through desolate landscapes "a heap of broken images, where the sun beats" reflects a culture bereft of vitality and grace. In Eliot's vision, alienation is the condition of modern man: spiritually parched, morally adrift and haunted by the ghosts of a vanished order. The poem's montage of voices mirrors the loss of unified subjectivity; the modern self, like the poem, exists in fragments. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis,* written seven years before the First World War, anticipates the same crisis in another form. Gregor Samsa, a dutiful son and traveling salesman, awakens one morning to find himself transformed into an insect a grotesque image of existential estrangement. His metamorphosis externalizes the alienation already latent in his life: his estrangement from his family, his subservience to labor, his silence before the machinery of social obligation. The absurd normality with which his family accepts his fate exposes the erosion of empathy and communication in the modern age (Camus 42). Kafka's prose, stripped of sentimentality, turns alienation into the grammar of existence; the horror lies not in Gregor's transformation but in the indifference that greets it (Kafka 25).

Modernism's fascination with alienation, then, is not merely a thematic choice but a structural principle. The fractured form of Eliot's poetry and the surreal logic of Kafka's fiction enact alienation formally: both dismantle traditional narrative coherence, replacing linear order with dissonance, ambiguity and absence (Spurr 27–28). Their stylistic innovations Eliot's collage of

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voices, Kafka's deadpan absurdity reflect the crisis of representation in a world where truth and meaning have become unstable Camus 29. In this sense, alienation in modernist literature is not just a subject to be depicted but a method of composition. This paper, therefore, examines alienation as both a theme and technique in Eliot and Kafka. It explores how Eliot's poetics of fragmentation and religious symbolism contrast with Kafka's existential irony and minimalist surrealism and how both writers transform alienation into an aesthetic of revelation (Spurr 40–41). For Eliot, alienation signals a yearning for spiritual rebirth; for Kafka, it reveals the futility of such yearning in a godless universe (Kafka 25). Their works, taken together, chart the moral and metaphysical boundaries of modernism where the self becomes estranged not only from the world but from its own voice (Joyce 92). The comparative study of *The Waste Land* and *The Metamorphosis* thus offers insight into modernism's central paradox: its simultaneous despair and vitality. In confronting alienation, both writers turn suffering into art, fragmentation into form, silence into language (Eliot 68).

Modernism was born amid the rubble of nineteenth-century optimism. The previous century had been an age of confidence in science, in reason, in empire and in God. The industrial and colonial expansions of Europe created an illusion of progress, a belief that human civilization was marching inexorably toward enlightenment and moral perfection. Yet by the early twentieth century, this faith had collapsed. The very instruments of progress technology, rational planning and nationalism had turned against humanity, producing war, alienation and mechanized death (Nietzsche 112). The once-celebrated achievements of modernity revealed themselves as symptoms of spiritual exhaustion. The machine, rather than liberating mankind, had enslaved it. As the poet W.B. Yeats observed in "The Second Coming" (1919), "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (Spurr 30). The "centre" here religious, moral and metaphysical was the axis of meaning around which human life once revolved. Its disintegration signaled not only the death of traditional belief but the fragmentation of consciousness itself (Joyce 66). This crisis of meaning formed the philosophical and cultural backdrop of modernism.

The rise of industrial capitalism transformed human labor into an extension of the machine. Karl Marx had already diagnosed this process as "alienation," a condition in which workers are estranged from their labor, their products and ultimately themselves. What had once been a creative expression of human will became a repetitive mechanical task governed by the logic of efficiency rather than the rhythm of life. The modern factory, with its relentless tempo and impersonal hierarchies, thus became a microcosm of the dehumanized world it helped to create a space where individuality dissolved into function and the worker became an anonymous cog in the industrial mechanism (Lukács 27). This mechanization of existence extended beyond the walls of the factory into every sphere of modern life. The human body, timed to the clock and measured by productivity, mirrored the machines it served and consciousness itself began to reflect mechanical

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precision rather than moral purpose (Camus 19). Cities, too, became emblems of this estrangement. The modern metropolis with its electric lights, crowded streets and hurried rhythms embodied both connection and disconnection. People were surrounded by others yet profoundly alone, enclosed in the anonymity of crowds (Joyce 66). The urban landscape replaced organic community with bureaucratic order; human relationships became transactional, mediated by money, technology and speed. In this new world, the individual could no longer locate meaning within work or society but only confront the vast impersonality of systems that reduced life to survival. The shop, the office and the tram replaced the church, the village and the hearth as the coordinates of existence, transforming not only labor but also love, leisure and language. For writers like Eliot and Kafka, this alienation was not only economic but existential. It represented a rupture in the very fabric of being the individual's separation from community, faith and selfhood (Nietzsche 120). The "machine age," for them, was more than a historical phase; it was a spiritual condition in which human beings, once imagined as reflections of the divine, now stood isolated within the cold rationality of modern progress. Eliot translated this estrangement into the imagery of drought and sterility, while Kafka rendered it through the grotesque confinement of Gregor Samsa. Both reveal that industrial capitalism's greatest tragedy lies not merely in material exploitation but in metaphysical exile: the loss of intimacy with one's own soul and with the transcendent meaning that once animated labor and life (Spurr 33).

The trauma of World War I intensified this condition to an unprecedented degree. The war's mechanized brutality the endless trenches, the gas, the mechanical slaughter destroyed faith in human rationality. Civilization, which had prided itself on moral and technological progress, revealed its capacity for barbarism. For a generation of artists and thinkers, the war was not merely a historical event but an epistemological rupture. It shattered the coherence of time and narrative, leaving behind what Virginia Woolf called "a world that had changed its structure" (qtd. in Spurr 29). The old forms of art and literature, built upon order and continuity, could no longer capture the fractured reality of modern life. In response, writers turned to fragmentation, irony and interior monologue formal strategies that mirrored the disintegration of the world they described.

At the philosophical level, Friedrich Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead" (*The Gay Science*, 1882) epitomized the spiritual vacuum of the modern age (Nietzsche 125–28). Without a divine anchor, morality became relative, truth became subjective and existence itself seemed devoid of purpose. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory deepened this sense of displacement by revealing the unconscious as a realm of irrational desires, dismantling the Enlightenment belief in a rational, unified self (Joyce 41). In this intellectual climate, alienation became more than an emotion; it became the defining ontology of modern existence. For T.S. Eliot, this loss of faith manifested as spiritual decay. In *The Waste Land* (1922), he depicts a civilization spiritually desiccated, cut off from the regenerative powers of myth, ritual and divine grace: "A heap of broken images, where

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the sun beats" (Eliot 22–23). For Franz Kafka, by contrast, alienation was not a spiritual crisis to be overcome but an existential reality to be endured; his protagonists exist in a universe ruled by invisible authorities and incomprehensible laws (Kafka 18). In both Eliot and Kafka, we encounter what Georg Lukács called "transcendental homelessness" humanity's loss of a metaphysical home (Lukács 29).

This historical and philosophical context illuminates why alienation became the defining theme of modernist literature. Modernism, as a movement, was not merely a reaction to aesthetic change but a response to the collapse of certainty. It sought to represent a consciousness fragmented by history and disoriented by modernity. The artist, once a moral guide, now became a witness to chaos (Spurr 40). For Eliot, the poet was a custodian of cultural memory, preserving the fragments of civilization; for Kafka, the writer was an interpreter of absurdity, articulating the inarticulable (Camus 47). Thus, modernism's crisis of faith and identity was a lived experience the collective realization that the old gods were dead and the new machines offered no salvation (Nietzsche 128).

In towers of glass we live alone,
Each face reflects, yet none are known. (Lukács 29)

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) stands as the definitive poetic expression of modern alienation. Few works capture with equal intensity the disillusionment of a civilization that has lost its moral compass and spiritual coherence. Written in the aftermath of the First World War when Europe lay in ruins both materially and psychologically the poem dramatizes the fragmentation of modern consciousness through its form, tone and symbolism. The five sections of the poem "The Burial of the Dead," "A Game of Chess," "The Fire Sermon," "Death by Water," and "What the Thunder Said" do not follow a linear narrative but function as a collage of disjointed scenes, voices and allusions (Eliot 37). This technique of radical fragmentation mirrors the discontinuities of modern life, where coherence has been replaced by chaos and communication by noise (Spurr 26–27).

The poem opens with a shock to poetic convention: "April is the cruellest month". Traditionally, April represents renewal and rebirth; Eliot subverts this pastoral optimism by presenting spring as an agony rather than a blessing. Rebirth, in a spiritually dead world, becomes torment because it forces awareness upon those who would rather remain numb. Eliot's imagery of desiccation "a heap of broken images, where the sun beats" condenses the poem's dual symbolism of drought and decay (Eliot 22–23). Throughout the poem, Eliot constructs a world haunted by absence: "Here is no water but only rock" encapsulates the desolation of a universe abandoned by grace. The repeated imagery of thirst reflects humanity's longing for spiritual nourishment in a time when religious faith has eroded (Spurr 35). The poem's polyphonic structure intensifies this sense of alienation. Voices drift in and out without clear attribution; fragments of literary quotation intermingle in a cacophony of disconnected speech, enacting the fragmentation of the modern self (Joyce 89). Eliot's mosaic of cultural memory drawing upon Dante, Shakespeare, Ovid and the

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Upanishads presents relics of a lost civilization: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins". The Fisher King myth becomes the central allegory for cultural and spiritual paralysis, the barren land mirroring the wound of modern humanity (Eliot 61).

Eliot's portrayal of women further extends alienation into personal relationships. In "A Game of Chess," sterile dialogue and the pub scene's crude gossip unite high culture and squalor in shared emptiness. Despite its pervasive despair, *The Waste Land* is not nihilistic. "What the Thunder Said" invokes *Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata* and ends with the whispered "Shantih shantih shantih" a prayerful hope rather than achieved peace (Eliot 77). Formally, the montage embodies crisis while rhythm and reference impose a tenuous order alienation as both diagnosis and yearning for redemption (Spurr 38).

The voices hum but never meet,
The heart forgets its ancient beat. (Eliot 77)

Despite its desolation, *The Waste Land* is not purely nihilistic. Beneath the despair lies a disciplined yearning for renewal; dense allusions to the Bible, Dante, Buddha and fertility myths suggest that fragments of tradition still survive and can be re-activated as moral memory (Spurr 40–41). In "What the Thunder Said," the parched landscape briefly trembles with possibility when the thunder articulates the three syllables of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata* which Eliot glosses as "give, sympathize, control," a triad that recasts modern lack as an ethical program: self-gift against possessiveness, compassion against isolation and self-mastery against chaotic desire (Eliot 75–77). Even the poem's fixation on drought "Here is no water but only rock" is counterpointed by momentary hauntings of rain and shore, signs that the very symbols of sterility also carry latent promise if rightly received. Eliot's montage does not restore a lost wholeness, but it "shores" meaning "against…ruins," staging recovery as an act of memory and form rather than triumphal revelation. The closing Sanskrit benediction "Shantih shantih shantih" accordingly refrains from announcing achieved salvation; it is an asymptotic peace, the prayerful cadence of a civilization learning again how to desire grace. In this light, alienation becomes diagnostic, not definitive: the poem registers spiritual bankruptcy precisely to re-educate attention and appetite, proposing that coherence if it comes will arrive through humility, disciplined sympathy and renunciatory love rather than through the old guarantees of progress or metaphysics (Spurr 41).

While Eliot's alienation is spiritual, Kafka's is existential. *The Metamorphosis* begins with one of the most shocking sentences in modern fiction: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed into a gigantic insect" (Kafka 3). In a single, dispassionate line, Kafka annihilates the stable boundaries between human and non-human, mind and matter. Gregor's metamorphosis literalizes the metaphysical estrangement that defines the modern condition; his grotesque new body externalizes an inward alienation that has long preceded

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the physical transformation (Camus 29;). The horror, however, lies not in the metamorphosis itself but in the normality with which it is received. The family's initial pity soon curdles into revulsion and avoidance, dramatizing the collapse of empathy and communication in modern domestic life. Their reactions mirror a world governed by instrumental rationality, where affection and value are determined by economic function rather than inherent worth. Gregor's usefulness as a traveling salesman had once sustained the family, but when his labor ceases, so does his humanity in their eyes. His insect form thus becomes a metaphor for the condition of the modern worker degraded into a mere appendage of the economic machine, valued only for productivity and discarded when incapacitated (Lukács 33). The uniformed father who now returns to work, the mother who faints at the sight of Gregor and the sister Grete who initially tends to him but later demands his removal, all represent facets of this moral decay. In Kafka's world, bureaucracy replaces the divine, routine supplants compassion and obedience stands in for meaning. The family apartment transforms into a microcosm of the modern bureaucratic order clean, efficient and emotionally vacant (Camus 42;). Gregor's transformation, therefore, is not an act of divine punishment or moral allegory but a diagnosis of existence stripped of transcendence. The insect body becomes the perfect image of modern subjectivity: trapped within matter, silenced by ineffable pain and rendered invisible by indifference. Kafka exposes how capitalist modernity converts human beings into "things," both economically and ontologically. His world is not one where God is dead, as Nietzsche lamented, but one where God has been replaced by the faceless logic of utility (Nietzsche 128). Thus, in *The Metamorphosis*, alienation is not a temporary condition to be cured but the very grammar of existence a silent testimony to the absurd, where the only truth left is endurance (Camus 47).

In *The Metamorphosis* (1915), Kafka turns alienation into a linguistic and existential landscape. The cool, precise narration normalizes horror, producing what Camus later called "the logic of the absurd" (Camus 29). Gregor still thinks in human terms, but his speech degenerates into unintelligible squeaks: "Did you hear the animal talking?" (Kafka 11). Language collapses, severing him from community and self alienation as loss of voice. The family's silence and spatial re-ordering locked doors, removed furniture, the fading picture compose a grammar of exile (Spurr 28). Death arrives as administrative closure, "without his consent," restoring the household's utility. Unlike Eliot's faint transcendence, Kafka offers no redemption: a post-theological universe of radical absence (Camus 42–47).

Eliot and Kafka, though different in form, language and faith, converge in portraying alienation as both a personal and civilizational crisis (Spurr 40). Each author, writing from distinct corners of modernity Eliot from the Christian humanist tradition of post-war Europe, Kafka from the secular Jewish margins of Prague translates the same spiritual void into unique artistic idioms. For Eliot, alienation emerges as a wound within the collective soul of Western civilization, a sickness born of forgetfulness, moral decay and the loss of sacred order. His response, therefore, is restorative:

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he seeks salvation through cultural memory, mythic recollection and spiritual discipline (Eliot 71). In contrast, Kafka's alienation is ontological; he rejects coherence altogether, exposing the absurdity of seeking order in a universe devoid of meaning (Camus 45).

Eliot's fragmentation gestures toward unity; it is the fragmentation of a seeker, one who assembles "these fragments…against [his] ruins" in a desperate act of remembrance. The very disjointedness of *The Waste Land* thus becomes a paradoxical form of coherence an attempt to rebuild meaning from the debris of history. Eliot's method of poetic collage, stitching together voices from the Bible, Dante, Ovid, Shakespeare, Buddha and the *Upanishads*, transforms fragmentation into a sacred archaeology of culture (Spurr 34). Each quotation, each echo, functions as a shard of lost wisdom a remnant of a once-unified civilization that the poet, like a modern-day prophet, seeks to reassemble through language. His allusive style does not simply exhibit erudition; it enacts a ritual of recovery, an act of faith in the endurance of tradition as a bridge to transcendence (Eliot 70–71).

This faith, however, is neither naïve nor complete. The fragments do not restore the wholeness of the past; rather, they testify to its irretrievability. Eliot's modern man is aware that the sacred cannot be fully recovered, yet he persists in invoking it. The juxtaposition of Christian, classical and Eastern sources becomes his way of mapping a spiritual continuum across time a "tradition" that binds disparate ages through shared longing for redemption (Eliot 73;). In this sense, the poem's fragmentation is both stylistic and theological: each broken image gestures toward an absent center and each echo becomes a prayer for continuity in an age of rupture. Eliot's project, therefore, is not to restore a lost unity but to sustain the *memory* of unity. His poetics dramatize the tension between despair and faith the conviction that even amid ruins, meaning survives in traces, symbols and rhythm. The poet's act of assembling fragments is an act of resistance against cultural amnesia, a deliberate assertion that modern art, though fractured, can still serve as the vessel of the sacred (Camus 43). In gathering "a heap of broken images," Eliot reclaims the role of the artist as spiritual mediator one who cannot heal the wound of history but can at least give it form, turning chaos into pattern and alienation into revelation. Kafka's absurdity, on the other hand, enforces disjunction: his worlds are labyrinths without exits, where consciousness beats against invisible walls of bureaucracy and silence (Kafka 18;). If Eliot's *The Waste Land* turns the modern city into a spiritual desert, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* converts the domestic room into a metaphysical cage. Both spaces one vast, one claustrophobic reveal the same human estrangement from grace and community (Spurr 40–41).

In *The Waste Land*, voices speak past one another, producing a cacophony of overlapping tongues that dramatize the impossibility of communion (Eliot 55;). The fragmented utterances of prophets, lovers and ghosts mirror a civilization where dialogue has devolved into echo. In *The Metamorphosis*, words fail altogether; Gregor's attempts to communicate dissolve into

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unintelligible sounds his voice literally devolves into noise (Kafka 11). Where Eliot's poem mourns the loss of divine conversation, Kafka's novella records its aftermath: the total collapse of language as a medium of human connection (Spurr 41). Both end in silence Eliot's prayerful "Shantih" and Kafka's mute death marking the limits of understanding and expression. Yet, their silences differ in texture and implication. Eliot's silence is redemptive, the stillness that follows supplication a yearning for the peace "which passeth understanding" (Eliot 77). Kafka's silence is terminal, the hush of extinction, where communication and compassion have ceased entirely (Kafka 25). Eliot's wasteland, though barren, still listens for divine thunder; Kafka's world has long ceased to expect it. In this contrast lies modernism's dual inheritance: the hope of transcendence and the recognition of its futility. Together, Eliot and Kafka chart the two poles of twentieth-century consciousness the theological and the existential, the fragment seeking grace and the insect resigned to absurdity. Both ultimately expose alienation not as an aberration but as the defining condition of modern humanity, where silence, paradoxically, becomes the final language of truth (Camus 47).

Between the two, the soul takes flight
Seeking meaning in endless night (Kafka 11).

Conclusion

Both T. S. Eliot and Franz Kafka stand as monumental witnesses to the alienation that defines the modern condition. In *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot translates civilizational disintegration into spiritual crisis, while in *The Metamorphosis* (1915), Kafka converts psychological despair into metaphysical absurdity (Kafka 31). Each writer articulates, in his own idiom, the fragmentation of modern experience Eliot through mythic reconstruction and ritual language, Kafka through existential minimalism and absurdity. Eliot's alienation is the alienation of memory and faith: fragments yearning for coherence, voices seeking redemption through recollection (Spurr 38). Kafka's alienation, by contrast, is the alienation of being itself meaning neither lost nor recoverable, but radically absent, as existence unfolds without purpose or metaphysical anchor (Camus 47; Kafka 27). Industrialization, urban anonymity and the erosion of faith render existence simultaneously mechanical and meaningless "a heap of broken images" in Eliot's desolate landscape and a grotesque, imprisoned body in Kafka's domestic labyrinth (Eliot 22–23;). Eliot interprets this condition as a moral and cultural collapse demanding redemption through memory; Kafka interprets it as the human condition stripped bare, where clarity arises only through lucid acceptance of futility (Nietzsche 128). For Eliot, myth and ritual preserve a tenuous thread toward transcendence an echo of divine order amid chaos (Eliot 73). For Kafka, the very absence of transcendence becomes revelation: by refusing false consolation, he exposes the absurd truth of being (Camus 46). Stylistically, Eliot's dense montage seeks recovery through rhythm, allusion and spiritual synthesis; his fragments strive to recreate the lost harmony of the sacred word (Joyce

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92; Spurr 41). Kafka's spare, clinical prose, by contrast, unveils the absurdity beneath ordinary syntax, using linguistic precision to reveal the limits of reason and empathy (Kafka 25). Where Eliot's language aspires to chant, Kafka's collapses into silence; both transform alienation into form. Their refusal of easy consolation preserves modernism's tragic dignity: one whispers hope into the void, the other listens to its echo. Together, they form the dialectic of twentieth-century consciousness the yearning for redemption and the acceptance of its impossibility through which modern literature confronts the eternal paradox of human existence (Spurr 41).

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