

Time, Self, and Decay: A Comparative Study on Aging in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath and T. S. Eliot

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Abstract

Aging is not only a biological process but also a deeply psychological and emotional experience that has impact upon human life. In literature, it is explored through several themes like identity, time, memory and self-awareness. An attempt is made in this paper to examine the concept of aging presented in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and T. S. Eliot using comparative approach, focusing on how both poets represent the relationship between time, self and decay. Plath presents aging as an intense and immediate experience that affects identity and emotional stability of humans while Eliot approaches it in a more reflective and detached manner. Through comparative study of selected poems such as “Mirror”, “Lady Lazarus”, “Ariel” and “Edge” by Plath, and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, “Gerontion”, and “Four Quartets” by Eliot, this paper explores how aging shapes self-perception. The study also uses ideas from critics such as Helen Vendler, Julia Kristeva, and Martin Heidegger to deepen the analysis. By comparing these two poets, the paper argues that aging is not a fixed experience but a complex process shaped by psychological, cultural, and existential factors.

Keywords: Aging, Identity, Psychological, Time, Decay.

Aging is a natural and physical process. In literature it is presented as something much deeper than that. It is connected to human identity, memory and the way human being understands themselves over a period of time. In literature, aging is a powerful theme because it allows writers to explore and analyse changes perceived in the self. The poetry of Sylvia Plath and T. S. Eliot offers two significant perspectives on the aspect of aging. While both poets deal with time and self-awareness in their poetry, their approaches are quite different. Plath presents aging as an intense and emotional experience, while Eliot presents it as a gradual and self-reflective process. By comparing their works together, it is clear how aging affects the human mind in different ways.

In the poetry of Sylvia Plath, aging is closely connected to one's identity. Her poems present individuals struggling hard to understand themselves as time passes. In the poem "Mirror", the idea of aging is presented through reflection. The mirror exactly reflects who one is. The mirror reflects, it cannot lie and it forces the woman in the poem to see her true self. This part of realising oneself is understanding who one is. The moment she looks into it; she becomes aware of her changing appearance. This changing appearance is a very casual routine that happens normally in any human life. Be it rich, healthy or whoever one is, nobody can escape this aspect of aging. Sylvia Plath says:

I am a silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruelty, only truthful...

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness. ("Mirror by Sylvia Plath")

This creates fear and anxiety in her. She trembles once she realizes that she is no more the old version of herself. Aging is not something that happens slowly but it becomes a sudden

realization that affects the mind deeply. The woman searches for her younger self in the mirror, but she cannot find it. She longs to be what she was, but she understood that she will no longer be able to become whom she was. She must accept her present identity because aging is a part of human life. This shows that aging creates a gap between past and present identity. This idea can be further understood using Jacques Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage," (*Redirect Notice*) where identity is formed through reflection. In Plath's poem, the mirror stands as a symbol of truth, but it is also a source of discomfort. The individual cannot escape from it as it reflects one's true self. The process of aging forces the self to confront reality. This confrontation snatches away the peace of mind and makes the woman lack peace. It is painful, disturbing and disgusting for her to perceive whom she is today. The individual becomes aware of loss, not just of youth but also of a stable sense of identity and the horrifying nature of the passage of time.

In another poem "Lady Lazarus", Plath presents another significant representation of aging. Here, the speaker describes repeated experiences of death and rebirth. Aging is not shown as a simple movement forward. Instead, it is repetitive and exhausting. Aging every time is connected to death, but not the exact death, a gradual death. The speaker feels that she is forced to relive her experiences again and again, of which she is not happy about. This creates a sense of frustration. But at the same time, the speaker also tries to take control of her situation. Towards the end, however she turns her suffering into a performance. This shows that aging is not about loss but about resistance. The individual tries to regain control over time and identity. The poet presents:

Dying Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call. (*Academy of American Poets*)

M. L. Rosenthal describes Plath's poetry as "confessional," (*Redirect Notice*) meaning that it expresses personal emotions in a direct way. In "Lady Lazarus", the speaker openly discusses the process of pain and survival. Aging becomes something that must be faced directly and boldly which cannot be ignored or hidden. This makes Plath's representation of aging very intense.

In "Ariel", the idea of aging is connected to the process of transformation that happens in life. The speaker moves quickly, as if trying to escape from limitations. Time is not slow here, it feels fast and uncontrollable, which is a real fact and this creates urgency. The speaker hates being stagnant, he hates staying in one place. Aging is presented as a force here that pushes the individual towards change. The poetical line "Melts in the wall./And I/ Am the arrow,/ The dew that flies, Suicidal, at one with the drive/ Into the red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning" presents it ("Ariel by Sylvia Plath"). Critic Helen Vendler in her blog points out that Plath combines emotional intensity with poetic control (*Leong*). Even though the emotions are strong, the poem is structured in a careful way. This balance structured in the poem makes the experience of aging confusing and meaningful at the same time. In the poem "Edge", aging reaches a point of completion, an ultimate end. Unlike earlier poems that show struggle, this poem presents stillness. The speaker in this poem appears calm, but this calmness is not comforting. It suggests a final point in one's life. ("Edge Poem Summary and Analysis/ LitCharts). Martin Heidegger's idea that human life is defined by awareness of death is considered here. Aging is not just about growing older. It is about moving toward an inevitable end (*Jacobson*). In Plath's poetry, this awareness creates tension rather than acceptance.

When comparing this with T. S. Eliot's poetry, a different approach is used. Eliot does not present aging as intense or emotional. Instead, it appears as a slow and thoughtful process. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", the speaker is very much aware of his aging, but he

does not react to it strongly. He repeats, “I grow old... I grow old...,” but this statement is filled with hesitation. The speaker is not sure of himself. He worries about how others would see him. Aging becomes a source of insecurity, but it does not lead to action. The line “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons” (*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T S Eliot) shows how time passes in small, ordinary moments. When normal activities are enjoyed, human life passes which he may not know or realize. Aging is not dramatic and it is quiet and gradual. The speaker’s sense of feeling disconnected from his own life reflects the idea of modern alienation. The individual is unable to find meaning or direction which has become a part of modern alienation. Hence aging becomes part of this condition.

In the next poem “Gerontion”, Eliot presents aging as a mere emptiness. The speaker does not show strong emotions. Instead, there is a sense of dryness and detachment. A sense of feeling empty and alone. Aging is not portrayed as a struggle but a loss of energy and meaning. The poet presents:

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought. (“Gerontion” by T. S. Eliot)

This is very different from the perception of Plath towards aging, where even emptiness is intense. In Eliot, melancholy is not active. In Plath, it is not passive but expressive. Eliot’s poem “Four Quartets” presents a more philosophical view of time, “In the beginning is my end. In succession/ Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended/Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place/ Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass. (*The Poetry Archive*) Here, time is not straight. Past, present, and future are all inter-connected. Aging is an aspect of a larger

pattern. The individual is not trapped by time but understood it and became a part of it. This creates a sense of calm reflection. The speaker tries to understand time rather than to fight. This is very different from Plath, where time is often portrayed as overwhelming.

An important difference between the two poets is the role of the human body. In Eliot's poetry, the body is not the central part. Aging is more about the process of thought and perception. In Plath's poetry, the body is a very important thing. It becomes a site of conflict. Susan Bordo argues that the body is shaped by societal expectations. In Plath, aging is connected to how the body is visualized by others. This adds a social dimension to her work. Michel Foucault's ideas about power helps in understanding Plath's poetry. He suggests that individuals are influenced by social systems. In Plath, the speaker is very much aware of these influences. Aging becomes a way of questioning them. Whereas in Eliot, this social aspect is less visible and the focus is more on individual experience.

Identity is yet another common theme central to both poets, but it is treated differently. In Plath, identity is unstable and aging makes this instability clear. The self-changes and struggles to remain whole. In Eliot, identity is uncertain, but the speaker does not confront it directly and he remains hesitant to discuss about it. This shows two different responses to aging. Language also plays an important role in the comparison. Plath's language is direct and powerful. It brings emotions to the surface while Eliot's language is more controlled and it creates distance. Cleanth Brooks argues that poetry holds multiple meanings at the same time. This is true for both poets, but the way they express it differs. Memory is another important aspect. In Plath's poetry, memory is strong and emotional. It affects identity deeply. In Eliot's poetry, memory is often fragmented and it does not create strong emotional reactions. This shows that aging is connected to memory in different ways.

Aging is a normal and universal human experience, yet its meaning and impact vary greatly depending on individual perception, understanding and cultural context. In modern

poetry, the theme of aging is explored with deep psychological and philosophical intensity, particularly in the works of T. S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath. Although they belong to different literary traditions, both poets engage profoundly with the passage of time, the fear of decline, and the transformation of identity. Comparing their treatment of aging is significant because it reveals how the same human condition can be expressed through contrasting poetic voices and techniques.

T. S. Eliot's poetry often presents aging as a form of spiritual and cultural decay. His works reflect the anxieties of the modern world, where individuals feel isolated and disconnected. While aging is closely linked to hesitation, loss of purpose, and the fragmentation of the self in Eliot's view. The modern individual is trapped in a state of indecision, unable to act meaningfully in a decaying world is portrayed by Eliot. In contrast, Sylvia Plath's treatment of aging is more personal, immediate, and emotionally intense. Her poetry reflects an inward struggle, where aging becomes a source of psychological distress and bodily anxiety. In "Mirror," Plath uses the image of a mirror to explore the harsh reality of aging. The mirror reflects truth without distortion, forcing the woman to confront her changing appearance. The line "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman rises" ("Mirror by Sylvia Plath") captures the painful transition from youth to old age. Unlike Eliot's broader cultural focus, Plath emphasizes the individual's internal experience, particularly the fear of losing beauty, identity, and control.

The comparison between Eliot and Plath becomes especially meaningful when considering their different perspectives on time. Eliot views time as cyclical and burdensome, often connecting it with history and tradition. His poetry suggests that aging is part of a larger pattern of decline in modern civilization. But Plath presents time as immediate and pressing, something that directly affects the body and mind. Her focus is not on history but on the present

moment and the emotional impact it creates. This difference highlights how aging can be understood both as a collective experience and as a deeply personal one.

Another important aspect of comparison lies in their poetic techniques. Eliot employs symbolism, allusion, and fragmentation to convey the complexity of aging. His poetry often requires careful interpretation, as meaning is layered and indirect. While Sylvia Plath uses vivid imagery and a confessional tone. Her language is direct and powerful, making the experience of aging more accessible and emotionally striking. While Eliot distances the reader through intellectual complexity, Plath draws the reader closer through personal revelation. Despite these differences, both poets portray aging as a process that leads to a crisis of identity. Eliot's characters struggle with self-doubt and a lack of direction, reflecting the uncertainty of modern life. Prufrock's inability to act or express himself confidently illustrates how aging can weaken one's sense of self. Similarly, Plath's speakers experience a loss of identity as they confront the physical and emotional changes brought by time. For Plath, aging is not just a natural process but a threatening force that challenges one's very existence.

Eliot presents aging as a reflection of cultural and spiritual decline, while Plath reveals its psychological and personal dimensions. Together, their works demonstrate that aging is not merely a biological process but a complex experience that affects the mind, identity, and sense of meaning. This comparison enriches our understanding of modern poetry and highlights the diverse ways in which poets respond to the inevitable passage of time. Overall, the poetry of Sylvia Plath and T. S. Eliot shows that aging is a complex experience. It is not just about physical change. It is about how individuals understand themselves over time. Plath presents aging as intense and immediate, while Eliot presents it as gradual and reflective. Both perspectives are important. Together, they show that aging is not a single experience but a combination of emotional, psychological, and philosophical elements.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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