

The Role of Generic Classification In Interpreting Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract:

The literary devices of a text are by and large dependent on genre. This, of course, is a broad question whose answers may vary when considering every genre individually. This essay explores the importance of generic classification considering *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope and *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. It draws from the work of scholars like Roland Barthes, Martin Esslin, and David Fishelov to examine the role of generic classification generally, and how it impacts readings of drama and poetry in particular. The two works are indicative of the multiplicity of ways that generic classification can play a role in the reading of a text because of their distinct handling of genre and generic devices. Pope's work relies on genre to inform the reader of its message as a mock-epic. He employs ekphrasis and burlesque to subvert the genre of epic poetry. Conversely, Beckett plays with genre, avoiding any definite categorisation of his play, and thus allows a wider interpretation of *Waiting for Godot*. Genre brings with it a set of techniques and conventions that give authors a range of tools to enrich their works. The essay concludes that generic classification is a key part of interpreting any text, and its conventions are necessary for forming a coherent picture of textual meaning.

Generic classification, as a component of literary criticism, allows critics and readers alike to contextualise the employment of specific literary and generic devices by authors. It often serves to broaden the textual richness of a literary work. We can take the term ‘generic classification’ to mean the categorisation of texts into literary genres, such as poetry or drama, and further classification into categories like lyric poetry or tragedy within the genres mentioned above. This essay will explore this while focusing on Alexander Pope’s mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock* and Samuel Beckett’s absurdist tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot*. *The Rape of the Lock* is an attempt at the reconciliation of two aristocratic families in 16<sup>th</sup> century England and a concurrent exploration of the political divide between Catholics and Protestants of the time. Pope parodies the classical epic style of poetry in attempting to trivialise the subject matter connoted in its verses—a common element in the mock-epic genre, which gives the reader reason to believe generic convention plays a role in the reading of the poem. Samuel Beckett’s tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot* uses stage language, such as mimesis and a lack of plot, to address the questions of absurdist and existentialist philosophy. Similar to Pope’s poem, the play’s tragicomic genre plays a role in its examination by the reader. This essay will argue the following thesis, considering *The Rape of the Lock* and *Waiting for Godot*: Generic classification plays a significant role in developing the interpretation of a literary text by grouping generic conventions together and addressing readers’ expectations.

The reader knows from reading works such as Homer’s *The Iliad* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* that the purpose of the shape and texture of classical epic poetry is to bring the actions and attributes of a single hero to the attention of the reader, usually to portray this hero in a positive light. Be it through Homer’s epithets for Achilles, or Milton’s evocation of our pathos in describing Satan’s defiance, the reader recognises that the exaltation of an epic hero is central to the epic itself. Pope’s form matches the norms of this genre, having been written in iambic pentameter, divided into cantos, and taking the form of heroic couplets as well. However, the parodical element of his verse lies in his apparent subversion of the grandiloquence of epic poetry. Homer uses ekphrasis, the exaggerated praise of objects and characters, to praise or uplift the image of the epic hero, whereas Pope exercises it as a tool for trivialising his hero’s action and the events of *The Rape of the Lock* in general. Ekphrasis, as a tool of parody, exemplifies the kind of literary technique that a reader with prior knowledge of epic poetry may expect from Pope’s poem. Pope additionally begins by imploring his “Muse” to “say what strange motive... could compel / A well-bred Lord t’

assault a gentle Belle” (Pope 5). Such an ‘invocation’, an author’s appeal for support from a muse or deity, is another popular feature of the classical epic. A glance at the use of generic conventions in the poem will tell the reader that *The Rape of the Lock* matches the style of classical epics. Knowledge of the epic genre allows one to stake the claim that *The Rape of the Lock* is an epic poem. However, the subject matter, intentionally trivialised and humourized to soften its blow on Pope’s English readership, tells us otherwise; it tells us that the poem is, in fact, a mock-epic, intended to imitate and thus subvert the existing norms of classical epic.

Just as *The Rape of the Lock* is recognisable as mock epic due to its subversion of classical epic poetry, *Waiting for Godot* may be classified as absurdist fiction and modernist drama because it breaks away from traditional theatrical norms, like a lack of individuality in all the characters and even minimal emphasis on their names (Esslin 3). Martin Esslin lays down several characteristics of literary works that may be classified as Theatre of the Absurd, including a disconnection between dialogue and action and “misleading” language and grammar (Esslin 12). Esslin’s essay attempts to define the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd by identifying various commonalities in the works of Beckett, Ionesco, and Adamov and classing these works under one genre. We could argue that the formation of a genre by recognising literary techniques strengthens the argument that the reader benefits from a collection of conventions and literary features to recognise. Ramona Cormier and Janis L. Pallister write that the “aspect of comedy in *En Attendant Godot*... is conventional in nature, having its origins in the farce” (Cormier and Pallister 45). They postulate, therefore, that Beckett borrows from traditional theatre in the writing of his text. Beckett also ensures his play avoids the conventional classifications of ‘tragedy’ or ‘comedy,’ choosing instead to classify it as ‘tragicomedy.’ It is then reasonable to argue that Beckett reinforces the notion that genre plays a role in his writing by simultaneously employing and defying the generic conventions of drama, as well as the subgenres of absurdist theatre and tragicomedy. The presence of both tragic and comic elements in *Waiting for Godot* makes its generic classification difficult. However, this avoidance of traditional classification is a typical quality of modernist literature and is thus also a generic device in the play. Techniques in *Waiting for Godot* such as “scatological word play” and “pantomime” are “traditional” in comedy, and therefore encourage the reader to classify the play as such (Cormier and Pallister 45). However, the tragic elements in the play both defy and abide by conventional

tragedy (Cormier and Pallister 47). *Waiting for Godot*, therefore, contains enough of both comic and tragic elements to be classified as a tragicomedy.

The conventions unique to the genre of either text play a part in influencing their reading by adding multiple dimensions to the usage of literary devices for the reader. A structuralist view on narrative, in keeping with the philosophy of structuralism, would reduce narrative into structures and substructures, such as sentences and words (Andrew 49). If the components that constitute genre could be explained by structuralist theory, it would favour the argument that genre is a collection of literary devices that can be found in all the works of a particular genre. This particular argument may be applied to the two texts in question in that both of them contain generic devices that will allow a reader to recognise a genre and thereby bring potential layers of meaning to the foreground when the reader interprets the text.

Having established that the classification of texts into genres allows access to a plethora of literary conventions that enrich the reader's analysis, it is essential to now address the issue of readers' expectations. David Fishelov argues that not only does the "reader [demand] compliance with the established generic conventions", but she also "expects the writer to manipulate these established conventions" to present a unique piece of writing that nonetheless complies in some way to "generic tradition (Fishelov). I would further argue that these expectations are addressed by accounting for generic classification during literary analysis. The reader is aware of Pope's intention to satirise England's then sectarian divide primarily because she can recognise the high burlesque that Pope utilises to depict the situation (Clever 125). His comparison of an aristocratic family feud to an argument in the world of gods highlights the poem's comedic elements while allowing the reader to recognise it as mock-epic readily (Pope 18). It also allows her to find further layers of meaning in Pope's verses. The mock-epic genre is instrumental in the reader's understanding of the connotation in Pope's verses precisely because it gives her a template to then recognise further areas of interpretation within that genre. It also develops her expectation to find said areas of interpretation. Glenn Clever describes Pope's poem as "exhibiting... ideal, mockery of an ideal, and real," which the reader may only infer by first knowing that the poem is, in fact, a mock-epic (Clever 125). The "progress" from the ideal to the real, Clever argues, is mirrored by the poem's progress "from morning to night" and "from selfish, to social, and finally to cosmic sensibility even in the characters presented" (Clever 125). This connection may only be drawn with knowledge of the ideal, the mockery of the ideal, and the real that is

presented in the poem, which is itself contingent on the reader's knowledge of the mock-epic genre. Therefore, it can be observed that the reader's expectations from a critical reading of the text are being set by the presence and identification of generic devices in *The Rape of the Lock*.

The extraction of Beckett's intention for making his literary choices in *Waiting for Godot* is also contingent in many respects on the extent of the reader's knowledge of tragicomedy and the Theatre of the Absurd. An understanding of existentialist and absurdist philosophy will no doubt equip the reader with the ability to establish a connection with what Beckett intended to communicate and what he included in his play. Moreover, the facets of absurdist theatre described in Esslin's essay are knowable to the reader only because they have been defined as traits of the absurd in the first place. Esslin's observation that Lucky's speech in Act 1 resembles a kind of philosophical argumentation is a connection that the reader may also draw only if she is familiar with the way philosophical arguments are depicted in literature, especially modernist literature (Esslin 11). The analysis of Beckett's dramatic choices in *Waiting for Godot*, such as the stage language and near-nonsensical dialogue between the characters, enhance the reader's understanding of it. Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that the genres and subgenres into which the play is classified, which group these choices together for the reader, is significant in the interpretation of meaning, specifically the intention of the author, in the text.

A potential counterargument to this essay's thesis is that the classification of a text is irrelevant to literary analysis as a whole. Roland Barthes mentions in his essay 'The Death of the Author' that the reading of literature in a modern context requires the removal of the author's "person" from the text (Barthes 143). Barthes argues that the context of the author's person structures the meaning that the reader can interpret from a text, and must be separated because meaning should not be "deciphered" but "disentangled" (Barthes 147). We may apply his argument of disregarding the structure of interpretation that the existence of the author imposes on the text to the study of genre, and consequently, we find a counterargument to this essay's thesis. Having defined generic classification earlier in this essay, the fact that genre also imposes its own structure onto the interpretation of literary meaning is evident. Hence, this counterargument would support the idea that generic classification is not at all significant in interpreting this meaning if Barthes' line of reasoning is employed. Therefore, this counterargument would also support the notion that one can

interpret *The Rape of the Lock* without any knowledge of the mock-epic genre. The same can be said of *Waiting for Godot* without considering the tragicomic or the absurd. Critically, it can be said without accounting for genre that *The Rape of the Lock* features metaphor, visual imagery, and hyperbole. The tone is deferential and admiring when describing most characters. A reader can recognise poetic devices such as these independent of any of its generic devices. A reader of *Waiting for Godot* may interpret the ramblings of Estragon and Vladimir to be a depiction of a bittersweet friendship or identify symbolism of power dynamics in the characters of Pozzo and Lucky, without prior knowledge of Albert Camus' absurdist philosophy or of modernist literature. However, such appreciation for individual instances where the authors of both works use literary techniques to enrich their writing does not necessarily constitute the identification of a broad, coherent meaning from the two texts.

Fishelov's claim about the need to address the reader's expectations partially helps in addressing this counterargument. The reader, though aware of the author's choices, and perhaps able to find meaning in them on their own, is still divested of the author's broader potential intention behind the text in its entirety. Consequently, the singular, comprehensive meaning, which she expects to infer from the entire reading of the text, is absent. Moreover, the reader's expectation of applying this meaning to the text as a whole, to explain the significance of literary choices made by the author, is unfulfilled.

It could be argued that the individual interpretations of literary devices in Pope's cantos and Beckett's play can only be interwoven to create a more extensive, broader understanding of a text once the works are classified as a mock-epic and a tragicomedy (falling under the Theatre of the Absurd genre) respectively. Rebecca Parkin mentions that Pope "anchor[s]" his subject matter in "established mythologies," which the reader may recognise and thus relate to his subversion of classical epic and recalling epic poetry's tendency to allude to mythology (Parkin 38). Without such knowledge, I would argue that the reader may only observe the mythical allusion and perhaps not infer Pope's intention to subvert the form used by his predecessors, like Milton. Similarly, the reader of *Waiting for Godot* will clearly recognise features of stage language and drama, but perhaps not recognise Beckett's intention of attempting to explore existentialist and absurdist philosophy.

Without generic classification, there are still multiple avenues for interpretation in a text. One may critically analyse *The Rape of the Lock* and *Waiting for Godot* and identify elements of literary value independent of their genre, such as metaphor or juxtaposition.

However, this essay argued generic classification is key to interpreting further meaning in the poem, which the reader may only find once the literary techniques of the genre are known to her. Moreover, genre and the employment of generic devices must be accounted for to address readers' expectation from a literary text. A potential counterargument was presented, centred on the idea that the structures for interpretation are not appropriate for the reader to find meaning in a text. However, it was argued that, while genre may be disregarded for interpreting meaning in individual literary devices, its conventions are needed to form a broader, coherent meaning out of the text. In conclusion, *The Rape of the Lock* and *Waiting for Godot* both exhibit qualities that prove this essay's thesis and reinforce the notion that genre, and therefore the classification of texts into genres, is significant enough to develop and sophisticate interpretation of meaning in literary texts.

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