



# PROBING MODERNISM THROUGH THE SELECTED WORKS OF T.S ELIOT

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**Abstract:** T.S Eliot is regarded as the pioneer of the modernist movement and Nobel Prize winner in 1948. He has made notable contribution as a poet, critic as well as a playwright. Major traits of modernism will be uncovered through his literary works.

**Keywords:** Modernism, Fragmentation, Absurdism, Symbolism, Degradation.

**Introduction:** Modernism started form early 1900s and lasted as long as late 1940s. Two major world wars (1914 to 1918) and (1939 to 1945) shaped modernism in different ways. T.S Eliot contributed to literary magazines and periodicals being The Criterion, The Egoist, Faber and Faber. Major key features of modernism are Fragmentation, Individualism, Experimentation, Absurdity, Stream of consciousness, Non-linear narratives, Free flowing of interior monologues, use of free verse, contradictory allusions and multiple point of view. T.S Eliot's works can be critically examined and significant adoption of modernist elements are to be determined.

- 1) The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock- published in 1915, appeared in the 'poetry' magazine. It is about a modern man named John Alfred Prufrock, being able to hear remarks by others. He is conveyed as a lover but does not have the courage to advance. Modern symbols like 'magic lantern (projector in today's times), 'nerves' and 'mermaids' are used. The speaker wishes to show his nerves on the lantern for his lover. Two major characters namely Prufrock and an unnamed woman are noted. Dangerous women, the mortification of ageing and the superiority of the imagined life are the major themes. The work employs stream of consciousness by fragmentation. Pessimism and absurdism are manifested through the tone.
- 2) Gerontion- published in 1917, appears to be a dramatic monologue comprising of 6 stanzas particularly representing psychological intuition of an elderly man; a boy is presented reading him out. The speaker is a post war person who has worked in war when he was young thus absurdism and pessimism are noted in his tone. Juxtaposition,

contradictory allusion were used by the speaker. Literary devices like alliteration, personification, repetition and enjambment were implemented.

- 3) The Wasteland- published in 'The Criterion's' very first issue of 1922, it is a poem dedicated to Ezra Pound. Protagonist 'Tiresias' borrowed from metamorphosis by Ovid, is blind and immortal. The poem is considered as one of his best works and is fragmented into five sections
- 1) The Burial of the Dead
  - 2) A Game of Chess
  - 3) The Fire Sermon
  - 4) Death by Water
  - 5) What the Thunder Said

The first section is subdivided into five more episodes. It is associated with myth and the burial system of the church. Second title is an allusion to two plays namely 'A Game at Chess' and 'Women beware Women' by Thomas Middleton. Two women are introduced in two scenes. They show the degradation of the contemporary society. Third section shows polluted river exhibiting spiritual decay. It marks out the sexual contact between typist and her lover. The protagonist Tiresias's instance is depicted directly in this section. Shortest section among the five is fourth one, showing 'Phlebas the Phoenician' killed by water signifying mortality. Fifth section conveys objective correlatives with the aid of thunder. Discontent, pessimism, imagism, fragmentation and individualism are the modernist elements witnessed.

- 4) The Hollow Men- published in 1925, is a free verse poem with no rhymes and written in 5 parts. The poem presents the post first world war culture about death and decay of the European society during those times. The very first line of the poem starts with the speaker assuming readers as 'hollow men'. Words like 'quite' and 'meaningless', 'stuffed men' portray the absurdism. Objective correlative is depicted by using the concept of hollow men.
- 5) The Journey of the Magi- is a poem consisting of 43 lines and three sections, published in 1927. The element of individualism can be seen as the poem is personal in tone. The poem has used metaphor as a literary device and that is visible when birth and death are represented as renewal and rebirth. It is about the journey of a Persian king Magi known as the three wise men, who visited new born Jesus Christ.
- 6) Ash Wednesday- published in 1927, particularly known as conversion poem because T.S Eliot was converted to Anglicanism. The poem narrates the conversion of the writer to anglicism in his dream and arouses the conflict linking flesh and the spirit. Personal tone is noted reflecting individualism as one of the modernist aspect.

7) Four Quarters- considered as the masterpiece of his career, published in 1943 include four sections namely:

- 1) Burnt Norton
- 2) East Coker
- 3) The Dry Salvages
- 4) Little Gidding

Each section has been interlinked with the other. Some of the stories are from Bhagwadgita. This work is considered to be written when Murder in the Cathedral was being written. The notion of time is studied in the first part, published in 1935. The imagery of air is taken up. The second part, published in 1940 deals with life and death and present as well as future. Earth is the supreme point in the section. Third section published in 1941, portrays a coarse depiction of human life and water as symbol of birth. Fourth being published in 1942 presents the influential factor as fire. To conclude the poem in a nutshell, it is unveiled that all of us are put together by air, earth, water and fire. Along with it death should be accepted.

Eliot's spiritual distress in the contemporary modern age is conveyed in Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama, published in 1933.

T.S Eliot has also coined literary terms such as Objective correlative, Disassociation of sensibility, Unification of sensibility.

**Conclusion:** Ultimately, most of T.S Eliot's works show one or more aspects of modernist characteristic. Eliot is hailed as the father of the modern poetry.

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