



Modernism in T.S.Eliot's Poem "The Waste Land"

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot is an excellent symbolist poet whose poems are regarded as era-making landmark works in the history of modern Western literature. The long lyric poem "The Waste Land" is Eliot's representative work. It has a variety of styles, draws from a wide variety of sources, and combines some characteristics of symbolism, imagism, and metaphysics. The poet has created many rich images of "Waste Land", most of which are difficult to understand and have complex and profound symbolic meanings. Thus, the poetry reflects the absurdity of reality, reflects on the plight of human civilization, and pursues the road to the redemption of the "Waste Land". This paper first reviews the existing research results on Eliot in the world, briefly describes the theoretical basis of the project, and classifies the image in The Waste Land. Then, the typical artistic techniques in the process of image use are analyzed in detail. After all these, by researching the typical images, the article not merely reveals their symbolic meaning but explores the reflection and criticism of modernity in poetry. Finally, the article traces the source of the modernity presented by Eliot in his poem through various sources.

Keywords: Modern Age, Modernist text, Waste Land, Allusions, Symbols, Fragmentation, Metaphor, Imagism

1) INTRODUCTION

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on September 26, 1888, in St. Louis, Missouri, an inland industrial city of America. He was the son of Henry Ware Eliot and Charlotte Chaincey Stearns. His first volume of poetry, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, appeared in 1917. Other most important poems appeared from 1918 to 1925 in which *The Waste Land* also include and it was published in 1922. Eliot's Christian Poetry appeared from 1925 to 1935. He also wrote some religious poetry, Prose and Verse Dramas. He was influenced by Indian Literature & Philosophy, Ezra Pound, Metaphysical poets, Dante and French Symbolists. Because of his big influence on poetry and his career achievements, T.S. Eliot was granted a Nobel Prize in Literature and an Order of Merit in 1948. A few of his famous poems include: "Four Quartets" (1943), "Ash Wednesday" (1930), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), *After Strange Gods* (1934) and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1940). He is also known as a critic. *Tradition and the Individual Talent* and *Hamlet and His Problems* are his famous critical works. Some of his early critical essays were *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *Homage to John Dryden* (1924), *Selected Essays: 1917–1932* (1932), and *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) also appeared. He died in London on January 4, 1965. *The waste land* is considered one of the most important poetic documents of the age. It expresses poignantly a desperate sense of the poet, and the age's lack of positive spiritual thinking.

2) T.S. ELIOT'S WORK "THE WASTE LAND" AS MODERNIST TEXT

2.1) The Modern Age

Modernism is a philosophical movement that, along with cultural trends and changes, arose from wide-scale and far-reaching transformations in Western society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among the factors that shaped Modernism were the development of modern industrial societies and the rapid growth of cities, followed then by the horror of World War I. Modernism also rejected the certainty of Enlightenment which is an era from 1650s to 1780s in which cultural and intellectual forces in Western Europe emphasized reason analysis and individualism rather than traditional thinking, and many modernists rejected religious belief.

Barth (1979) quotation:

"The ground motive of modernism, Graff asserts, was criticism of the nineteenth-century bourgeois social order and its worldview. Its artistic strategy was the self-conscious overturning of the conventions of bourgeois realism."

Modernism, in its broadest definition, is modern thought, character, or practice. More specifically, the term describes the modernist movement in the arts, its set of cultural tendencies and associated cultural movements, originally arising from wide-scale and far-reaching changes to Western society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In particular, the development of modern industrial societies and the rapid growth of cities, followed then by the horror of World War I, were among the factors that shaped Modernism. Related terms are modern, modernist, contemporary, and postmodern. In art, Modernism explicitly rejects the ideology of realism (a reproduction, on the screen, of the ideological structures/world we encounter in “everyday” life) and makes use of the works of the past, through the application of reprise, incorporation, rewriting, recapitulation, revision, and parody in new forms. The realist aesthetic fails to comprehensively challenge explore the structures of the dominant forces and world-view in society and art – Which cannot challenge or explore sexist, racist, or fascistic ideologies – are a blank critique and an utterly redundant social activity; art without the ability to challenge or explore social attitudes is not really art at all. Modernism also rejects the lingering certainty of Enlightenment thinking, as well as the idea of a compassionate, all-powerful Creator. In general, the term Modernism encompasses the activities and output of those who felt the “traditional” forms of art, architecture, literature, religious faith, social organization, and daily life were becoming outdated in the new economic, social, and political conditions of an emerging fully industrialized world. The poet Ezra Pound's 1934 injunction to "Make it new!" was paradigmatic of the movement’s approach towards the obsolete. Philosopher and composer Theodor Adorno, who, in the 1940s, challenged conventional surface coherence, and appearance of harmony typical of the rationality of Enlightenment thinking, articulated another paradigmatic exhortation. A prominent characteristic of Modernism is self-consciousness. This self-consciousness often led to experiments with form and work that draws attention to the processes and materials used. The pillars of modernism are-

David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) – Sons and Lovers, James Joyce (1882- 1941) Ulysses, Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888- 1965) Murder in the Cathedral, George Bernard Shaw (1856- 1950) Mrs. Warrant’ Profession, William Butler Yeats (1865- 1939) The Land of Heart’s Desire, John Galsworthy (1867- 1933) The Man of Property etc.

2.2) The Waste Land as a modernist text

“The Modern Age, a period of sudden and unexpected breaks with traditional ways of viewing and interacting with the world. Experimentation and individualism became virtue, where in the past they were often heartily discouraged”

The best example of modernist literature is T. S. Eliot’s “The waste land.” Throughout this poem, Eliot shows us the real image of culture and society after the World War 1 and 2. This poem depicts an image of the modern world through the perspective of a man finding him hopeless and confused about the condition of the society.

“The waste land illustrates the contemporary waste land as a metaphor of modern Europe.”

Eliot’s the waste land is very hard to describe and analyze because this poem mainly deals with the idea of modern age and its new technique. In this poem the waste land, there are so many features and influence of the modern age, and we can apply some of the characteristics of the modern age in this poem .

2.3)Characteristics of the modernist literature:

- the impact of the two world wars
- Anxiety and Interrogation
- Art for life’s sake
- Using disjointed structure to reflects the dysfunction of western society
- Breakdown the tradition or breakdown of established values
- Realism
- Urbanization
- Psychology and literature
- Bad treatment of love and sex
- The influence of Radio and Cinema

The modern age is the most complex, complicated and revolutionary age in the history of the world. The people of this age challenges everything like,

T. S. Eliot said that modernist literature is....

“.... A way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history....instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art”

2.4) Characteristics of the modernist literature in the waste land:

- The waste land made a tremendous impact on the post war generation, and is considered one of the most important documents of the modern age.
- The poem is difficult to understand in detail, but its general aim is clear. Based on the legend of the Fisher King in the Arthurian cycle, it presents modern London as an arid, waste land.
- The poem is built round the symbols of drought and flood, representing death and rebirth, and this fundamental idea is referred to throughout. Other symbol in the poem are, however, not capable of precise explanation.
- In a series of disconcertingly vivid impression, the poem progress by rather abrupt transition through five movements:



T. S Eliot's The Waste Land is known as the most important poem in the twentieth century. This poem has marked the line of new English poetry. This poem influenced not only poets but also critics. The New Criticism is an approach of criticism which flourished after the publication of The Waste Land as its source of theory. It might be argued, however, that this poem is observed as a window to modern literature.

3.) The Waste Land as a modernist text is observed through many aspects which are as follows:-

3.1.)FRAGMENTATION AND METAPHOR

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is an elaborate and mysterious montage of lines from other works, fleeting observations, conversations, scenery, and even languages. Though this approach seems to render the poem needlessly oblique, this style allows the poem to achieve multi-layered significance impossible in a more straightforward poetic style. Eliot's use of fragmentation in *The Waste Land* operates on three levels: **first**, to parallel the broken society and relationships the poem portrays; **second**, to deconstruct the reader's familiar context, creating an individualized sense of disconnection; and **third**, to challenge the reader to seek meaning in mere fragments, in this enigmatic poem as well as in a fractious world. By scanning the whole poem, incoherence is clearly found within its four sections. The fragmentation of paragraphs is not so apparent until the second part, *A Game of Chess* but from there on the jumpy structure becomes more and more noticeable. Eliot often goes from short lines, with, as little as one or two words that cut off at unnatural times

“Do; You know nothing?

Do you see nothing?

Do you remember; “Nothing?”

I remember;”

to long sentences, within mere seconds. In Part II we see the line

“HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME”

written in capital letters, which is one of two lines written this way. Eliot is constantly introducing new formats throughout the poem, and most of time, are not repeated again. Part I begins with a more typical, symmetrical format, but rapidly changes, keeping the readers on their toes in unexpected ways.

The most important aspect of the poem that illumines its meaning and significance in spite of its obscurity and ambiguity is its metaphorical nature. Jean Michel Rabate argues that “**The Waste Land is fundamentally a poem about Europe.**” The connection between the poem and the historical context of the modern era reveals that the poem metaphorically illustrates the actual condition of modern Europe; the barren and lifeless waste land is a metaphor of Europe after World War I. Eliot uses this “dialectic of analogies” to metaphorically depict the condition

of postwar European society, demonstrating the “disillusionment of a generation”. Understanding this metaphorical nature of the poem is essential in studying the poem, in all of its confusing and chaotic elements, within its proper context. Harold Bloom, among many other critics who share the same opinion about the poem, argues that *The Waste Land* can be read as a “testament to the disillusionment of a generation, an exposition on the manifest despair and spiritual bankruptcy of the years after World War I”—a dead land of spiritual famine and drought. In his interpretation of the poem, Andrew Ross describes *The Waste Land* as a metaphor expressing the “cultural infirmity of Europe after the Great War . . . as a sign of the post-War times”. This argument for the metaphorical nature of the poem is valid; the text repeatedly refers to the decay of western civilization after World War I. The speaker observes the “Unreal City,” London, after the War—**“under the brown fog of a winter dawn / A crowd flowed over London Bridge.”** He is disillusioned and confused at the scene; he **“I had not thought death had undone so many”**. This surreal and foggy image of London—its streets filled with “sighs, short and infrequent,” and “each man fixed his eyes before his feet” accurately and poignantly demonstrates the despair and grim reality of modern Europe.

3.2.) USE OF ALLUSIONS

Allusions are an interesting feature of modernist literary works because the modernists believed in Ezra Pound's motto **“make it new”**. Allusion and obscurity to describe an image of the physical desolation of the society that was torn and devastated out of the War and he also tries to transfer a kind of spiritual disappointment and despair. As Eric Svarny argues that, the dry, barren, lifeless images in the poem form an “evocation of post-war London”.

Eliot makes wide ranging allusions across literatures and legends of various ages and cultures — ranging from The Bible, Sappho, Catullus, *Pervigilium Veneris*, *Aeneid*, *Metamorphoses*, Dante's *Inferno*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the legend of Tristan and Isolde, Spenser's *Prothalamion*, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Tempest*, Middleton, Webster, Donne, Byron, Joseph Campbell, Wagner, Tennyson, Walter Pater, Baudelaire, Rupert Brooke, Walt Whitman, Theophile Gautier, Apollinaire, Wyndham Lewis, Aldous Huxley, Yeats. These allusions add symbolic weight to the poems contemporary material, to encourage free association and to establish a tone of pastiche, seeming to collect all the shards of an exhausted civilization into one huge patchwork of modern existence. Perhaps it is also a response to the dilemma of coming at the end of a great

tradition; the poet seeks to address modern dilemmas and at the same time to participate in a literary tradition. The method of assembling “fragments” or “broken images” from the past into a sort of mosaic allows him at once to suggest parallels between contemporary problems and earlier historical situations and to disorient the reader, turning the reading process into a model of modern, urban confusion. It parallels the Cubist use of collage, calling attention to the linguistic texture of the poem itself and to the materials (both literary and popular) out of which it is constructed. Influenced by Pound and Joyce, allusion, for Eliot, became a favorite technique for reconciling formal experiment with an awareness of literary tradition. Thus, with allusions and quotations in various languages, *The Waste Land* stands as a collage of poetic fragments representing an entire culture in crisis.

3.3.) SYMBOLISM:

Eliot's *The Waste Land* can be observed as a window to modern literature in a sense that it represents the ultimate application of the norms of one of the movements that appeared in that century, which is the French Symbolist Movement as suggested by most critics including Dr. Rakesh. In his, book *T.S. Eliot: An Evaluation of his Poetry*, Ramji Lall argues that *The Waste Land* is a symbolist poem saying:

Intimately related to this aspect of *The Waste Land* is its quality as a symbolist poem, where there is much suggestion and implication, and many hints of possible meanings, but where nothing stated with absolute finality.

Thus, it can be said that *The Waste Land* is a window to the style of symbolism developed by the French Symbolist Movement. This symbolist style represents a great trend followed by writers of modern literature. Symbolism of *The Waste Land* suggests these ancient fertility rites, but always gone awry, particularly in such instances as the fortune-teller Madame Sosostris. Built around the symbols of drought and flood, representing death and rebirth, the poem progresses by abrupt transitions through five sections — “The Burial of the Dead”, “A Game of Chess”, “The Fire Sermon”, “Death by Water” and “What the Thunder Said,” and is a powerfully moving presentation of sterility and disruption. Eliot’s work is seen as an urge to return to the Renaissance ideal of a “complete” man with “unification of sensibility,”.

The poem Presents the picture of a desolate London (populated by ghostly figures like Stetson, the fallen war comrade) abounding in physical, moral and spiritual decay, symbolized by rats and garbage surrounding the speaker in “The Fire Sermon” — among whom Buddha and St. Augustine appear as the representations of Eastern and

Western philosophy, unable to transcend the World on their own, despite their intense spiritual ardor — thus, revealing the futility of man’s struggles, however fervent and passionate.

3.4.) IMAGISM:

Eliot's *The Waste Land* can be observed as a modernist text in a sense that it represents the ultimate application of the norms of the movements that appeared in the century. There is a movement led by Ezra Pound which is known as IMAGISM. This movement emphasizes the use of images in literary works. It is clear that *The Waste Land* is full of images; not only this but also it is wholly based on images. The poem is full of images and allusions, which has been a trend in the twentieth century not only by Eliot and Pound but also by so many others like Yeats and Joyce. In brief, it can be said that the poem represent the common trend of the twentieth century in terms of images and allusions. For example In the first section, “Burial of the Dead,” Eliot writes, “A heap of broken images, where the sun beats” which is a perfect example of his Imagist inspiration. This line brings to life the concept of a loved one with the warmth of a sunny day.

3.5.) MEANINGLESSNESS OF RELATIONSHIPS:

In a modernist literature society, that lacks hope and a sense of significance; many aspects of life lose their meaning and are reduced to trivial things. In the waste land, relationships between people in the modern society are reduced to something that is sterile, lifeless, and dry. The various characters that appear in the poem are unable to carry a logical and coherent dialogue.

This impossibility of meaningful communication corresponds to the dismal and hopeless reality of the modern society and also intensifies and dramatizes the speaker’s anguish and frustration at world. For example, in “A Game of Chess”, demonstrate the impossibility of communication and thus relationships:

“Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.

What are you thinking of? What thinking?

What?

I never know what you are thinking. Think.”

The speaker of these lines is unable to communicate with the person he is speaking to, thus failure in communication reflects the isolation and lack of connection that characterize relationships within disillusioned and dismal modern society.

“What is that noise?”

The wind under the door.

“What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?”

Nothing again nothing.

“Do

You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you

Remember

“Nothing?”

This lines suggest a sense of chaos and obscure the meaning of potentially unequivocal expressions the speaker is unable to communicate anything articulate and meaningful. Through this depiction of relationships and communication, Eliot demonstrate that one of the social effects of the war is the lack of harmony and community and the ultimate isolation of the individual resulting from the sense of despair and meaninglessness in the midst of the desolation of modern Europe.

4.) THEMES OF WASTE LAND CLEARLY REPRESENT THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNIST PERIOD

T.S.Eliot expertly uses various themes and motifs in his poem to present the kind of society after World War 1 in modernist time. Themes of lust, death, rebirth, the seasons, love, water, history, The Damaged Psyche of Humanity, and The Changing Nature of Gender Roles. The Waste Land embodies other common themes of the modern literary tradition, such as the disjoint nature of time, the role of culture versus nationality, and the desire to find universality in a period of political unrest. The poem also has a number of recurring themes, most of which are pairs of binary oppositions such as sight/blindness, resurrection/death, fertility/ impotency, civilization / decline, voice/silence. Thus, the poem is a glimpse of the collective psyche following the World War I and an aesthetic experience exemplary of the Modernist literary tradition. I A Richards influentially praised Eliot for describing the shared post-war “sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavor, and a thirst for life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed.”

5.) SOME CRITICAL REVIEWS ON WASTELAND AS A MODERNIST TEXT

Many critics observe modernity through *The Waste Land*. In his *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine*, Levenson H. Michael states the following:

Modernism has been defined as a rejection of traditional 19th-century norms, whereby artists, architects, poets and thinkers either altered or abandoned earlier conventions in an attempt to re-envision a society in flux. In literature this included a progression from objectivist optimism to cynical relativism expressed through fragmented free verse containing complex, and often contradictory, allusions, multiple points of view and other poetic devices that broke from the forms in Victorian and Romantic writing, as can be seen in T.S. Eliot's "*The Waste Land*".

He also suggests that modern philosophy can be perceived in *The Waste Land*. In this context, he says: The varied perspectives or lack of a central, continuous speaker uproots "*The Waste Land*" from previous forms of poetry; however, it is not simply for the sake of being avant-garde, but to espouse the modernist philosophy, which posits the absence of an Absolute and requires the interpretation of juxtaposed, irreconcilable points of view in order to find meaning. The first stanza illustrates this point. Within the first seven lines, the reader is presented with a "normal" poem that conforms to an ordered rhyme and meter. Suddenly, the German words "Starnbergersee" and "Hofgarten" are introduced, readjusting the reader's own view of the poem, before throwing it completely off-course in line 12: "Bin gar keine..." Just as quickly, though, the lines revert to a previous pattern with the use of "And I...", "And down...", "And when..." "Discontinuity, in other words, is no more firmly established than continuity,"

Regarding the use of fragments in this poem, Michael Levenson observes his technique as a modern one. He states: Eliot also employs fragments in the work, further articulating his modernist ideas. These fragments are sometimes used to blur the lines between speakers, but also serve to blend opposing strands of knowledge. Trying to singularly categorize the usage of fragments is as difficult as finding a unified meaning in the poem and that is the entire point. Yet, in keeping with modernist thought, can there exist an "entire point"? The answer is inevitably fragmented. In lines 307-311, "To Carthage then I came/ Burning burning burning burning/ O Lord Thou pluckest me out/ O Lord Thou pluckest/ burning", the words of St. Augustine from his *Confessions* and the Buddha's *Fire Sermon* are crammed together to form a new, incongruous whole. This synthesis hints at some sort of "truth" that may be discovered by joining these ancient bits of wisdom, two differing perspectives.

He concludes suggesting the view held in his paper that The Waste Land could be observed as a representation of the modern literature. In this context, he says:

The human experience is fragmented and defies logic, and in order to fully convey this, modernist poets such as Eliot had to bend and break conventions, and their own expressions may culminate in something which is not fully expressible within modern society, though modern society was used as an indirect means of getting at this "Inexpressible." A better way of putting it could be that Eliot's The Waste Land was a direct way of getting at something indirect from the modern world, for it required a reinvention of poetics and the very use and meaning of language. Since the modern period is said to extend to this day (it's debated whether it's post-modern or not, since both elements survive), any final say on the matter is difficult. What can be said is that Eliot's poetry, as misinterpreted, misread, and misunderstood as it may be, is a quintessential cornerstone in modernist thought, a fragment in the puzzle, which may yield an emergent whole, though it may not be fully grasped.

Jean-Michel Rabate perceives the poem as a masterpiece of modern age. Rabate states in this context:

The peculiar "obstetrics" to which the manuscript of the poem was subjected has often been discussed. It is generally agreed that Pound's cuts transformed a chaotic mass of poetry into a precise, aggressively modern masterpiece.

Conclusion

The poem waste land, because of its complexity and depth, is a difficult poem to understand and analyses. The most notable aspects of the poem that have been discussed in this analysis illumine some, though not all, characteristics of modernity that are depicted in the poem.

According to Eliot's image of the modern world in the waste land, the modern society is surrounded by obscurity, chaos, disillusionment, and a desire to return to the ancient times of security and order. The waste land is one of the best examples to the modern age and it also reflects the characteristic in "The Waste Land."

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