

An Approach of Modernism: A Critical Study of the Selected works of T.S. Eliot

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Abstract

Constructed as an icon of modernism, Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was comprehensively instrumental in shaping the Anglo-American literary canon in the early twentieth century. He perceived the divisions and tortured convolutions of consciousness, which is a major preoccupation in his poetry, not merely as aberrations of the individual psyche but as symptomatic of, and resulting from, the historical and cultural circumstances of his time. It is noted that, his views on ecology, urbanization, and the environment continue to be relevant for the twenty-first century. He prophesied, in several significant ways, the developments that have taken place in these spheres in the second half of the twentieth century, and his cautionary wisdom on these matters remains as a signpost for the present and the future. The aim of this paper will be to examine the selected works of T.S. Eliot and to ascertain his poetry articulates the anguished predicament of modernity's quest for meaning and significance in a world of seeming chaos, fragmentation and heterogeneity.

Keywords: Modernism, Twentieth century, Heterogeneity, Ecology, Fragmentation.

“When the news of Eliot’s death came through, commercial television had just presented an abridgement of Middleton’s *The Changeling*. Watching it, I thought that this could never have happened if Eliot hadn’t opened our eyes to the greatness of the Jacobean. Spike Milligan, on a comic TV show, could say, “Not with a banger but a wimpy”, and most of the audience caught the reference. Weather forecasters would joke about April being the cruellest month.”

Anthony Burgess, *Urgent Copy*

Introduction

More than any other singular figure of the 20th century, barring likely James Joyce, the most celebrated and influential poet of the post-war period, Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) bridled the literary world in the period between the wars and produced a revolution in poetic and critical taste. He was born in America, and embraced English citizenship in 1927. The story of his advancement from disdainful desperation to spiritual quietude and abatement within the Anglican fold can be traced with such precision in his poetry that almost it appears to have been patterned beforehand. There may seem to be nothing in common between the creator of *Prufrock*, *Burbank*, *Bleistein*, and *Sweeney* and the theologian who was a mainstay of the Malvern conference, but it is possible to follow each step along this pilgrim road.

Discussion

The journey commences with the poems collected in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), *Ara Vos Prec* (1919), and *Poems* (1920). The earlier one has been paralleled to the appearance in 1798 of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*. In *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot captured the spirit of his age, defining its disillusionment and quest

for ethical and spiritual values, and the need for a new tradition to replace the cultural barrenness left after the Great War. Secrecy and severance, massacre and melancholy, death and destruction, ambiguity and agony, after the First World War gulped the whole European society, were the essence of his poetry. As the poem *Waste Land* confesses: ‘*Burning burning burning burning / O Lord Thou pluckest me out/ O Lord Thou pluckest burning*’ (‘The Fire Sermon’). The poem *Gerontion* (1920), also alludes ‘*thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season*’, is the connecting link between the early poems and *The Waste Land*, (1922) which is delimited as the corrupted nature of humanity. The role of the prophet Tiresias as the focus of the present and the past is key to an understanding of the poem. It is noted that the poem is based upon Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, a monograph relating the Grail legend to the fertility cults of Tammuz and Adonis. There is consequently much sexual symbolism and imagery, are taken from *The Golden Bough*. This landmark poem *The Waste Land*, which baffled critics but created a sensation – particularly among the young, who supposed Eliot as the *avatar* of the modern age, a literary icon whose poetic technique, vision, and artistic sensibility were profoundly puissant. With characteristic diffidence, he dismissed the role thrust upon him as the age’s spokesman. By this poem, Eliot acquires the combined power of lyrical intensity and the wider, social implications of the epic.

Like ‘Prufrock’ and *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, too, was assembled from fragments that Eliot had written over a period of time. The same mood is preserved in *The Hollow Men* (1925), a picture of the “insert resignation” of those who breathe the small, dry air of modern spiritual emptiness and destitution, and that the title springs up more transparently from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* or from the character Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* who is referred to as a ‘hollow sham’ and ‘hollow at the core’. As Eliot details, how we, the living, wish to be seen by “those who have crossed/with direct eyes [...] not as lost/ the stuffed men”. He further relates figures “gathered on this beach of the tumid river” – drawing considerable influence from Dante’s third and fourth cantos of the *Inferno* which delineates about Limbo, the first circle of Hell- showing man in his inability to cross into Hell itself or to even beg redemption, unable to speak with God.

However, the variation came in *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and like *Hollow Men* this poem, too, originated out of separate poems, and then gradually Eliot came to see it as a sequence. Eliot depicted his endeavor in *Ash-Wednesday* as an attempted exploration of ‘the experience of a man in search of God, and trying to explain to himself his exquisite human feelings in terms of the divine goal. This is a poem not of Easter Joy but of the beginning of the penitential season. The mystic vision is not attained, but there is the record of the steps along the mystic way. It is sometimes alluded to as Eliot’s “conversion poem”, *Ash-Wednesday*, with a base of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, is richly but ambiguously allusive and deals with the move from spiritual barrenness to hope for human deliverance. As the poem expounds:

“Because I do not hope to turn again

Because I do not hope

Because I do not hope to turn....”

The poems of the following decade exhibit for the most part a developing hardness and exility of manner, with rhythms often scarcely distinguishable from prose. *Sweeney Agonistes* (published in 1926, first performed in 1934) marks a reversion to the early mood of satiric revulsion from modern vulgarity. In *The Rock* (1934) the words only are Eliot’s, the scenario of this ecclesiastical pageant having been supplied by someone else. His final significant work of poetry, *Four Quartets* (1945), and is envisaged by many as Eliot’s greatest poetic accomplishment. The sequence collectively entitled *Four Quartets*, beginning with *Burnt Norton* (1939) and continuing through *East Coker* (1940) and *The Dry Salvages* (1941) to its culmination in *Little Gidding* (1942), brings together the abstruseness of modern technique and imagery and the simplicities of traditional lyric measures. The poems are meditations on the power of memory and private experience to reach a form of transcendence that all of Eliot’s works explored. In the austere asceticism and confident dogmatism of these poems there is an impressive restatement of Christian faith in terms of contemporary poetic idiom and contemporary speculations about time. It may be noted that *Four Quartets* are four interlined meditations with the common theme being man’s close relationship with time, the universe, and the divine. In depicting his understanding of the divine within the poems, Eliot conjoins his Anglo-Catholicism with mystical, philosophical and poetic works from both Eastern and Western religious and cultural traditions, with reference to the ‘Bhagavad-Gita’, ‘the Pre-Socratics’ as well as ‘St. John of the Cross’ and ‘Julian of Norwich’.

His ingenious endeavors time to time turned from poetry to drama. In his plays, most uncommonly *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), and *The Cocktail Party* (1949), he comprised a new kind of poetic drama impinged with the search for spiritual meaning evident in his poetry. *Murder in the Cathedral*, a drama on Thomas Becket, has as much significance for the dogmatist and moralist as for the student of drama. In criticism, Eliot endeavored an immense impact in redefining literary gusto, reasserting the power of metaphysical poets such as John Donne, and refashioning a critical framework for a new modern classicism to replace the imprecision and moralizing of the Victorians. *The Family Reunion*, an even bolder venture, was not so happy an attempt: it dealt with a grim story of crime, remorse, and purification, and in imitation of Greek tragedy allowed the modern Furies of conscience to appear on the stage. In *The Cocktail Party*, a similar synthesis was tried, with a more felicitous outcome.

In his essay *The Metaphysical Poets*, Eliot methodizes a clue to his desires: “our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into meaning”. It may be noted that, space is lacking for a full estimate of Eliot’s work as a critic. However, the six significant volumes from *The Scared Wood* (1920) to *Elizabethan Essays* (1934) contain the richest collection of critical pronouncements our age has to show. To be sure, they contain eccentricities of discretion sufficient to illustrate a primer of modern critical heterodoxy. Often mistaking personal predilections for principles of universal validity, Eliot, by the luscious self – assurance of his manner, imposed his tastes and discretions upon his following. But no other modern critic has so thoroughly ploughed the old fields of literature, bringing forth new fruit by forcing even his opponents to subject inherited values to new scrutiny. Howsoever, *Homage to John Dryden* (1924) and *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928) point out characteristic lines of thought and feeling. *Dante* (1929) is Eliot’s profoundest piece of criticism and *After Strange Gods* (1934) his most masterful.

Conclusions

T.S Eliot’s writings helped to shape modern literature in the 20th century. In 1948 he was awarded the British order of merit and the Nobel Prize for literature, becoming the only Missourian to date to win a Nobel Prize. Peter Ackroyd, one of Eliot’s latest and most fluent biographers, has no axes to grind, but he subscribes to the neurotic, relativist image of Eliot’s inner psychic being. It is to say that Eliot is a poet of personal knowledge is not to issue a license for infinite biographical speculation. So long as Eliot is viewed from the perspective of secular psychologism we will be bereaved of the healing power of his art. Though, it was a modern age, yet we find that Eliot is standing class apart from his generation encompassing all the ages- right from Chaucer till Pound and others. He can indeed be yclept as “The Renaissance Man of 20th Century”. The austerity of Eliot’s philosophy, his concentrated pessimism, his frank conveyance of a religious and moral lesson, appeal to emotions that will be felt by the most sophisticated audience. However, his pursuit made an impression the world over, not merely through emulation and direct influence, but also more importantly and seminally by providing a basis for radical rethinking about literary and critical issues. As Charles Altieri eulogizes, in assessing the essence of Eliot’s comprehensive influence, ‘we shift from trying to inhabit the mind of specific writers to attempting to delineate a theatre in which Eliot becomes a stimulus focusing a range of possible investments in versions of his work. His applied antidotes of wisdom, clemency, flexibility and ‘a respect for the religious life, for the life of prayer and cogitation’ may still hold valuable answers for the malaise distressful contemporary civilization.

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BIOGRAPHIES



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