

AN EARTH-SHATTERING PSYCHIATRY OF OBSCURE SYMBOLS AND IMAGERY IN T. S. ELIOT'S THE WASTE LAND

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Abstract

The use of a symbolic style can benefit a poet to achieve economy, direction, great emotional and spiritual intensity, which direct statement, might not be able to provide. A poet may draw upon the stock of conventional symbols or else he can contrive his own set of symbols to which he alone possesses the key. Symbolists usually use private symbols in their poetry. This, in the end, results in the obscurity of the poem. Although Eliot was influenced by the French Symbolist poets, and although he was not averse to the use of the private symbols, yet most of his symbols and images are conventional – drawn from myths, religion, literature, nature and urban scene. Some of these symbols, however, are compound of the conventional and personal symbols. The contorted lines, un-intelligible of quotations and opaque symbols increase the obscurity of the poem. The technical complexity and novelty, verbal ambiguity, and allusiveness of the style, all tend to bring obscurity in a work of art. Thus the present paper is an attempt to explore this element of obscure symbols and imagery in the Eliot's The Waste Land.

Keywords: Conventional symbols, imagery, mythical method, obscure obscurity, representative poems, and spiritual intensity.

Introduction -The theme and structure of the wasteland

The Waste Land is one of the most representative poem of the 1920's. In this poem, there is an excellent balance between the theme and the structure. The poem is concerned with the nature and meaning of the spiritual chaos which is a modern malaise. The Waste Land delineates the sterility of people in the modern society. Basically, it is spiritual sterility, though it is projected by Eliot through the imagery or 'physical' or 'sexual' sterility. In the context of the Waste Land sterility means the lack of will power, lack of a sense of purpose in life and lack of the sense of direction. Although this seems to have been occasioned by a total disappearance of faith or traditional Christian morality, the religious or moral nature of the faith is not always stressed. Eliot suggests that in the modern world faith in secular, humanistic objectives has also disappeared.

God and love were the two motivating forces

God and love were the two motivating forces in the past and people were willingly ready to lay down their lives for these twin objectives. In a sense, God and love were the two sources from which life derived its direction, meaning and purpose. Modern people, however, have lost their moorings in these two things and hence they are drifting aimlessly. The world has come to be dominated by the twin factors of money and commerce. These factors give no meaning to human life which can be acquired only in human or religious terms. On the contrary, religion has been trivialized into fortune telling and love has degenerated into sex. In a word, commercialization has demeaned man.

The life in the Waste Land

The people of Eliot's the Waste Land, therefore, live an aimless and purposeless existence. Their life is cheerless and dull and there is no motivating force in it. Such a life is as good as death—such people can be hailed as 'living dead.' In fact, they resent anything that has a promise of nourishment in life. April, which is the period of rebirth and rejuvenation of life in nature, after the deadness of winter, for the people of Eliot's waste land, it has become the "cruellest month". On the other hand, they feel happy in winter, which keeps them "warm, covering earth with forgetful snow." The people of The Waste Land would rather die, but even death would be meaningless. It would be mere cessation of life leading to no consequence whatever. Eliot seems to suggest that the quality of death is ultimately dependent on the quality of the life lived.

Interplay between two kinds of life

In contrast to this meaningless life and meaningless death delineated on the surface of the poem, there is another kind of life and a different kind of death constantly evoked in the poem on the subterranean level. Because life in the past had been vital and people had lived and suffered willingly, death had a tremendous significance. The death of martyrs bore fruit in the sense that it inspired people for great and immortal deeds. These martyrs, even though dead, lived on in the lives of those who derived inspiration from them. This led Cleanth Brooks to suggest that the poem is built on interplay between two kinds of life and two kinds of death – a sterile life leading to sterile death, and a purposeful life leading to a fruitful death.

The Waste Land is a contemplation of spiritual death arising from the isolation of man from God. The predicament is accentuated by man's preference to a life of creature comforts and physical pleasures, devoid of moral concerns and spiritual consciousness. Human life, under such conditions, has been reduced to birth, copulation and death.

The five part structure

The themes of The Waste Land have not been logically elaborated by Eliot – they are rather suggested through the five part structure of the poem. It is like a five-act tragedy. Eliot has tried to interweave the myths of the past with the life of the contemporary world. This mythical method of "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaries and antiquity" has provided the poem a great structural unity. It is the framework of myths that controls the outward structure of the poem. In its structure of five movements, like a musical symphony, the poem explores the nature of the spiritual chaos and death which is the predicament of the modern man.

Eliot's Poetic Shorthand

The device by which Eliot has sought to bring about the merger of the past with the present can be termed "poetic shorthand." Tiresias is able to provide Eliot with a symbol that can integrate the past and the present. He is a living symbol of human consciousness. He is at home in all periods of history and has experience of both the sexes. The stream of consciousness of Tiresias provides the poem a structural unity. In this Hugh Kenner sees an evidence of the influence of F. H. Bradley's philosophy dealing with the all-inclusiveness and all-comprehending nature of man's subjective experience.

The unreal city

Tiresias links London with other unreal cities of Europe. A single phrase in Baudelaire – “unreal city” – identifies London with Paris, Munich and other European capitals. Then by means of a few citations to the multitudes in Dante’s *Inferno* he connects them with London crowds. Similarly the Biblical echoes link the modern waste land to the evil land of the Scriptures where sinful humanity, isolated from God, and panic-stricken lives in perpetual fear of God.

Various parts of poem

Eliot has divided the poem in five parts. The first part introduces the theme of death-in-life and puts forward many examples of it. The Hyacinth girl scene brings in the theme of life and passionate love which, however, merge into the predominant theme of death-in-life. The second section demonstrates sterility at both ends of contemporary society. The third movement of the poem gathers the themes and leads to a dramatic climax. The fourth movement introduces the theme of salvation – how the curse of sterility can be fought although the section does not lead towards salvation. The last section takes up the twin themes of life-in-death and death-in-life but there seems to be no resolution. The repetition of the words ‘Shantih, Shantih, Shantih’ suggests this resolution though there is no clear indication of this resolution.

The wasteland is the beautifully woven tapestry of Symbols and imagery

The Waste Land is one of the most representative poems of modern English literature. Eliot has used many devices in this poem that provide the poem a unity of tone. These devices include the use of the mythical method, poetic shorthand and reference to many cultures. Imagery and symbolism also contribute towards the achieving of this unity. Images and symbols may be hailed as those words and phrases that give rise to ideas of sensory perceptions. A poem often arouses our excitement by making a pattern of images so that the reader becomes not so much fascinated by meanings as stimulated by sensations. A symbol may be likened to a pebble cast in a pool of water causing a succession of ripples one following the other in a sequence of concentric circles. Although Eliot was influenced by the French Symbolist poets, and although he was not averse to the use of the private symbols, yet most of his symbols and images are conventional – drawn from myths, religion, literature, nature and urban scene. Some of these symbols, however, are compound of the conventional and personal symbols.

The examples of the use of private symbols are not many in *The Waste Land*. The more important of these private symbols consist of “the red rock,” “the dog” and the “broken Coriolanus”. The bulk of the imagery of *The Waste Land* consists of two types: those drawn from the common aspects of urban life and those drawn from religion, myths and ritual. Among the common images drawn from urban life may be included “a taxi, waiting, throbbing.” It is used to explain the momentary excitement in the jaded heart of the female typist, raising her head at the end of her day’s work, which is almost mechanical work, with no intellectual overtones added to the work. To this category also belongs to the conclusion that *The Waste Land* is an obscure poem. It is a difficult poem, no doubt. However, once we get some insight into the intricacies of Eliot’s mythical method, his basic themes and related symbols, the poetic shorthand and the imagery of the poem, *The Waste Land* would not remain obscure anymore. On the contrary, it would yield meaning so that it can be enjoyed and appreciated.

The first and foremost reason for the difficulty and obscurity of the poem is its rigorous compression which was mainly dictated by Ezra Pound. To Ezra Pound, the first version of the poem appeared to be “a sequence of poem” bound together by a common theme, without any organic unity, however Pound applied his critical insight and poetic acumen to reshape the poem. He made a number of significant changes in the poem. He eliminated the epilogue of the poem. It was later published by Eliot as an independent poem and titled it “Gerontion.” He deleted some of the songs and lyrics and persuaded Eliot to remove the prefatory quotation from Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. As a result of these clippings the poem was reduced by Eliot, to half its size. The structural unity which the poem now possesses is because of Pound, whom Eliot hailed as the “better craftsman.” Though Pound’s efforts brought about some structural unity, it caused many difficulties in the understanding of the poem. Every poet erects certain signposts to guide his readers to the meaning he intends to convey. Yet in the case of The Waste Land all these signposts had been eliminated by Pound. Hence to arrive at the heart of the poem has become a difficult task. Although Tiresias has been brought in the poem for this very particular purpose, yet he is too nebulous a figure for our purposes. For the uninitiated it is difficult to enter into the heart of the poem. The interior monologue is marked by a free association of ideas which enhances the difficulty of understanding the poem.

Mixture of various philosophies of the poem

Another factor responsible for the obscurity of the poem is its allusive style. The poem draws on various cultures, literatures and fields of knowledge, like philosophy, anthropology and religion. Although allusiveness is a marked quality of all good literature, yet in the case of Eliot the problem has been worse confounded. Eliot, then, draws on the Bible, Shakespeare, Dante, Baudelaire, James Joyce and others. Further, he takes a certain extract from some author and altering its key word, uses it in his poem. For example, the line “keep the dog far hence” is an altered version of a line from Webster. Thus Eliot makes his meaning independent of the meaning intended by Webster.

The indirect method and symbolic technique also contribute their share in enhancing the difficulty of the poem. Eliot’s symbols are not only complex they are also ambivalent. These facts hamper our efforts at arriving at any exact meaning. However, justification for this complex technique can be certainly offered. Eliot began with the intention of interweaving parts of several cultures into a complex whole and telescoped the antiquity and the contemporarity to make the modern history meaningful. This technique was used very effectively by Eliot.

Modern technicians of poetry are usually compared to the proverbial Quaker’s horse that is difficult to catch but good for nothing when eventually caught. This is, however, not the case with Eliot. With him our labors are amply rewarded. The ore of solid gold of wisdom lying at the core of the poetry is there provided one braces himself to take that out. Eliot’s poetry may be obscure, yet with some grounding in this method and manner we certainly enjoy the poetry.

The element of obscurity in The Waste Land

The Waste Land has been written in many styles and in its making went many strands of the poet’s reading. Naturally, on its publication it was accorded a mixed reaction. Edmund Wilson regarded

it as the greatest achievement of the Symbolist movement in English which had so admirably succeeded in giving expression to the profound disillusionment of the contemporary times. I.A. Richards praised it for bringing about a complete severance between poetry and all beliefs. F.R. Leavis praised the poem's "inclusive consciousness" of the age. F.O. Matthiessen considered the poem as a great work of art opening up new possibilities of the use of the resources of the language. Then, the critics who denigrate the poem maintain that the poem is a piece of tripe. It has been described by Louis Untereyner as "a set of separate poems, a piece of literary carpentry, scholarly joiner's work, the floatsam and jetsam of a desiccated culture a pompous parade of erudition." The kaleidoscopic effect produced by the succession of contrasting scenes adds to the difficulty of understanding the poem. The contorted lines, un-intelligible of quotations and opaque symbols increase the obscurity of the poem.

Eliot on the charge of obscurity

Eliot was himself conscious of this charge of obscurity against this so monumental poem. He said that "the charge has been brought against the more original literature of our times that it has been written for a small and exclusive audience." In answering this charge Eliot observed: "This is a consequence not of individual aberrancy but of social disintegration in the literary aspect of critical decay. It arises from lack of continuous communication of the artist with his friends and the fellow artists and the small number of keen amateurs of arts, with a larger public educated in the some way, of taste cultivated upon the literature of the past, but ready to accept what is good in the present, when it is brought to their notice, and so with the world at large."

Elements of Obscurity

This is true as far as it goes, but it does not go very far. It does not spell out the whole truth about the element of obscurity of the poem. The technical complexity and novelty, verbal ambiguity, and allusiveness of the style, all tend to bring obscurity in a work of art. All this must not lead as to the image of the Bradford millionaire like silk hat which typifies the awkward posture of "assurance" on the face of the Young Man Carbuncular, the evening guest of the typist. Another example of this variety would be the image used by one of the Thames daughters to convey the sense of utter emptiness in her life: "I can connect nothing with nothing, the broken finger-nails of a dirty hand."

Images from myths and rituals

The most significant symbols of *The Waste Land* come, however, from myths, legends and rituals. These symbols centre round the basic themes of death and rebirth. While spring is traditionally associated with rebirth and rejuvenation of life, winter is linked with death. Drought is symbolic of spiritual dryness while rain points towards spiritual fertility. The hard rock breaking under the sun may typify spiritual disintegration, while water and fish symbolize fertility of spirit. Many of these symbols are used ambivalently by Eliot. For example, water and fire both have destructive and cleansing properties. Fire may typify sexual desire as in *The Buddha* and the St. Augustine references, as also the purgative flames in Dante and the second altar fire. This ambivalence is also latent in such primary symbols as the burial of the dead, planting of the corpse, and journey and voyage.

Symbols for human predicament

The avowed aim of Eliot in *The Waste Land* is to express the human predicament in the modern waste land and this he accomplishes with the aid of telling images. Thus, the spiritual sterility of modern man is sought to be underscored by the picture of a stony and barren wilderness, where the sun beats, reducing the dry rocks to a heap of broken images, and the dead tree giving no shelter and there is no trace of water either. In such a soil how can roots “clutch” and branches “grow”? In such a soil who can be sure of the sprouting of the planted corpse in the face of the blasting frost and the destructive nails of the dog. London becomes an “unreal city” under the impact of the fog wrapped in the dusky atmosphere of Dante’s Hell and Limbo, in which the crowds pouring over London Bridge becomes a fit counterpart for the multitude undone by death which greeted Dante’s horrified vision. The heat of the scorching and blasting sun changes into the flame of fire in the third movement of the poem where the sense – ridden humanity receives a precise definition from the Fire Sermon of the Buddha and the words of Saint Augustine “burning, burning, burning.” Then, in the Second movement of the poem Eliot presents the idea of stalemate -- of life come to a dead end, physically, spiritually, sexually and mentally. With this is jettisoned the picture of life as a prison, meaningless, dull languid movement in a narrow circle, pin-pointed by many images – “we are in the rat’s alley, when dead men lost their bones.” And the turning of the key – “we hear the key turn, each in his prison, thinking of the key, each confirms his prison.” This idea is reinforced by the images indicative of squalor, vulgarity and the like. Thus we find the river seating oil and tar and becoming ridden with the dirty freight of empty bottles, cigarette ends, and silk handkerchiefs, etc. These are memorials of the summer parties and sexual encounters between the city nymphs and the dale sons of merchants and city directors. The protagonist sits fishing in the dull canal behind the gas house, while a rat crawls on its slimy belly through the rich vegetation, where white bodies naked have been deposited by the stream of the river. Then comes the image of the city breaking and dissolving, London Bridge falling down and the “hooded hoards” swarming over the plains, ringed by flat horizon only, amid sounds of material lamentations, in the violet light of civilization, falling upon the ruined black and broken walls, with bats with baby faces crawling downward down them; and upturned towers and reminiscent bells and sounds of human voices singing from empty cisterns and exhausted wells. On top of everything looms the ominous symbol of the ‘red rock’ suggesting the apocalyptic vision of the doomsday, the vision of the wrathful God sitting in judgment over sinful humanity, which finds warmth in winter and shudders at the thought of the renewal of life in the month of April. This god-less humanity is panic stricken and finds fear at every step – fear of life, fear of death, fear in the languid ecstasy of love satisfied and the torments of love unsatisfied, which is reinforced by the atmosphere charged with external terror:

“Red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From the mud cracked houses.”

The release of the stalemate

The release from the stalemate is also suggested by appropriate images, such as “heart shaking with blood in awful daring of a moment’s surrender”; the boat gliding smoothly under expert hands, and a cock crowing with the sound of thunder and the welcome touch of damp wind

bringing rain. The process of reconstruction is indicated by the protagonist's desire to set his own house, at least, in order, with the help of the "fragments he has shored against his ruin."

Conclusion

At its first publication *The Waste Land* was described by many critics as a statement of the psychology of a disillusioned generation. However, Eliot described such expressions as nonsense. He said, "I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned but that did not form part of my intention. The reality is that in the march of civilization the human race has passed through the phases of spiritual slump when progress appeared to have reached a point of stalemate. But before long ways and means were devised to tide over the crisis. If history repeats itself the repetition is applicable not only to the crisis but also to the success of getting over it."

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