



Tradition and the Modernist Sublime

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Abstract

This paper explores the pivotal role of T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) as the primary architect and leading practitioner of the Modernist movement in English poetry. His contributions stem from a radical redefinition of poetic expression and critical standards, specifically his call for poetic depersonalization. Moving past the subjective emotionalism of the nineteenth-century Romantics, Eliot claims that “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion”. This critical stance is functionally realized through his concept of the “objective correlative” which demands that internal emotion be expressed indirectly via a precise, externalized “set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events”. Eliot avoids merely stating despair; instead, he constructs an external, sensory world that compels the reader to experience the desolation themselves. This emphasis on indirect, sensory, and intellectualized expression is the cornerstone of his Modernist legacy. By analyzing the “objective correlative” as a sophisticated extension of Imagist principles in his two renowned poems, this study reveals how Eliot uses concrete sensory formulas to achieve a depersonalized but profoundly resonant aesthetic. While Eliot’s “The Waste Land” relies on a “heap of broken images” and an array of symbolic personae to mediate emotion, his “Four Quartets” adopts a more direct, meditative voice, allowing Eliot to portray society through a lens that is simultaneously realistic and deeply religious. Consequently, this paper concludes that Eliot’s mastery of intertextuality and stylistic evolution ensures his continued relevance as the preeminent figure in the Modernist literary tradition.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot, Modernist Poetry, Objective Correlative, Poetic Depersonalization.

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Introduction

T. S. Eliot stands as a profoundly influential American poet and critic of the early twentieth century. His concept of the “objective correlative” is a critical theory and poetic technique he introduced in his 1919 essay “Hamlet and His Problems”. It proposes a specific, external formula for the expression of emotion in art, particularly poetry, contrasting sharply with the direct, subjective emotionalism of Romantic poetry. In essence, the technique requires the poet to find a precise, concrete, and externalized equivalent for an internal emotion. Instead of simply stating an emotion, the poet presents a specific object, image, or situation that, when perceived by the reader, evokes that same emotion. The internal feeling is thus “correlated” to an “objective” reality. This idea aligns closely with the principles of the Imagist Movement, which stressed precision, economy of language, and the creation of clear, definite images.

Eliot’s erudition and cultural breadth served as a significant fount of inspiration for numerous contemporary writers and poets, including luminaries such as Ezra Pound and James Joyce. Eliot’s poetic technique is characterized by the use of the “objective correlative”, a concept connected to the Imagist Movement. By rooting his technique in the “objective correlative”, Eliot aligns his work with the Imagist movement’s rejection of vague sentimentality in favour of hard and dry precision. This concept Eliot famously defined as a “set of objects, a situation, [or] a chain of events” that acts as a sensory formula for a specific emotion reflects the Imagist mandate to provide direct treatment of the “thing” rather than an abstract description of a feeling. Just as Ezra Pound and T.E. Hulme advocated for the “luminous detail” to eliminate “poetic slush”, Eliot utilizes the objective correlative to transmute the poet’s private experiences into tangible, external symbols that trigger an immediate aesthetic response in the reader. In this context, his poetry functions as a sophisticated extension of Imagist principles, where the structural arrangement of concrete images serves as the essential vehicle for complex psychological and spiritual states.

All in all, Eliot’s objective correlative posits that the objects, situations, and images within a poem must directly correlate with the specific emotion the poet intends to evoke. Griffiths claims that “[objective relative] remains an important feature of early twentieth-century literary theory” (2018, p. 657), implying that the term is still a cornerstone in the Modernist poetry. Eliot advocated for a poetic standard marked by perfection, correctness, complexity, and inherent difficulty in apprehension. Furthermore, his inclusion of epigraphs in his poems was a deliberate strategy intended to enhance their clarity for the informed reader. Eliot’s aesthetic philosophy upholds that poetry should be characterized by perfection, correctness, complexity, and a certain degree of difficulty in apprehension. Furthermore, he strategically incorporates epigraphs into his poems, ostensibly to enhance the clarity of their underlying meaning for the reader.

Theoretical Background

T. S. Eliot was the father of modernism; Ellis suggests that “Modernism [...] was crucially dependent of a number of ideas Eliot put forward in the years immediately following the First World War” (2018, p. 53). Eliot also set the framework of what the Modernist poetry is, claiming that poetic criticism must be impeccable and executed within the realm of objective reality. He interprets “traditional” in poetry not as a lack of originality, but as a state of being cultured and extensively versed in literature, possessing comprehensive knowledge of complete European literature. He suggests that tradition is a dynamically evolving concept with which an adept poet must keep pace. His redefinition of the concept of tradition was highly rational and instrumental in establishing him as an influential 20th-century poetry critic.

Eliot generally favours urban poetry composed in free verse, exemplified by “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. This free verse approach was subsequently adopted by other Modernist poets. In this specific poem, Eliot utilizes interior monologue and is recognized as a pivotal figure in the

employment of the dramatic monologue in poetry. He believes a poet's role is not didactic but merely to depict the surrounding world as perceived. Eliot is masterful in his command of language, often incorporating multiple languages in his work, employing poetic language with the skilful artistry of a painter manipulating colours; Hart states: "Eliot's flirtation with the language of personal understanding is both coy and revealing" (2006, p. 183). Furthermore, his appreciation for art and music is evident in the inherent musical rhythms of his poems when read aloud. He is credited as the first poet to utilize the objective correlative in modern poetry, targeting a primarily cultured audience. His brilliant use of intertextuality further distinguishes his work, collectively cementing his status as a significant intellectual of his age and the most paramount figure of the Modernist movement in poetry.

Eliot advocates for the poet's detachment from personal feelings, endorsing the principle of "depersonalization" in poetic expression. He asserts that poetry should transcend being a mere outpouring of the poet's raw emotions, serving instead as a manifestation of the poet's aesthetic intellectuality. Consequently, a poet is tasked with the aesthetic synthesis of feelings, thoughts, and images. Eliot fundamentally critiques Romantic poetry, particularly its emphasis on sentimentality, idealization, and sublimity, thereby dismantling the stylistic conventions of emotionalism and tranquillity prevalent during the Romantic period. He famously articulates this stance, stating that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (2006, p. 2324). He further posits that an accomplished poet must exhibit consciousness and deliberateness. In this context, Eliot argues that poetry should constitute a unified experience of thought and emotion, distinct from the Romantic conception of emotion, which must be rendered through an objective rationality, a combination the researcher considers the optimal framework for poetry.

As a critic, Eliot defines the role of the poet as follows: "The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning" (2006, p. 2330). Eliot's poetic reaction was primarily directed against 19th-century Romanticism. Deviating from traditional Romantic perspectives on poetry, he frequently adopts contemporary, modern society as his subject matter. He refrains from centring on the personal "I" and deliberately excludes his own emotions from the core of his poetry, adhering to the belief that a poet must remain external to his creation.

Eliot inaugurated a new form of poetry with the Modernist movement, which garnered appreciation from his contemporary audience. His rational and realistic style has also resonated with the present researcher; his profound implications regarding modern society are impeccably articulated in his poems. Furthermore, his brilliant application of dramatic monologue strengthens the underlying meaning of the lines. The dramatic monologue involves a single speaker, subjecting the reader to that speaker's psychological state. For instance, his early poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", offers the reader Prufrock's perception of modern society, his personality, thoughts, and emotions. Prufrock is characterized by depression and shyness, and his indecisiveness about attending a party is effectively conveyed through the use of dramatic monologue. The poem's imagery is anti-Romantic, depicting even the city streets as depressing and devoid of meaning. Prufrock functions as a symbol of the alienation experienced by modern society at the time of the poem's composition.

Eliot navigated personal periods of difficulty, including a loss of Christian faith, potentially influenced by the brutality of war, before evolving into a more religious figure in his later years. These on-going transitions are clearly observable in his poetry, resulting in distinctions between his early and later styles and thematic concerns. While he embraces greater realism in his later work, the integration of music and poetry persists. Eliot's life was marked by personal vicissitudes, including a documented loss of Christian faith, perhaps precipitated by the devastation of war, followed by a turn toward increased religiosity in his later years. These transitions are overtly manifested in his poetic output; his early style and subject matter contrast distinctly with his later works. While he adopted a more realistic posture in later poems, his synthesis of music and poetry remained a constant element.

Eliot's establishment of a new poetry within the Modernist movement garnered appreciation from his contemporaries. The present researcher is notably affected by his rational and realistic style, recognizing the masterful presentation of modern societal implications in his verse. The skilful use of dramatic monologue significantly strengthens the poems' latent meanings. In this form, a single speaker dominates, subjecting the reader to their psychological perspective. For instance, in the early poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", the dramatic monologue unveils Prufrock's perception of modern society, his personality, thoughts, and emotions. Prufrock, a figure who is depressed and indecisive about social engagement, embodies the alienation characteristic of modern society at the time of the poem's composition, a feeling underscored by the anti-Romantic imagery that depicts even the city streets as meaningless and depressing.

"Waste Land" and "Four Quartets" by T. S. Eliot

"The Waste Land" remains Eliot's most celebrated and widely favoured poem. Adopting a novel poetic style, it depicts once-beautiful locations, such as the River Thames, as unpleasant, a departure from Romantic tradition. This work employs an aesthetic of ugliness. Furthermore, the poem utilizes four different languages and effectively communicates the chaos experienced by modern society during World War I. Eliot's preference for multiple languages is partially driven by their sonic qualities. The poem conveys the disillusionment of modern society, portraying it in a grave context, concurrent with a more critical tone in his language.

The thematic core of "The Waste Land" lies in its portrayal of a "heap of broken images" symbolizing the collapse of Western cultural coherence in the wake of industrialization and global conflict. Eliot utilizes a "mythic method", juxtaposing the modern urban wasteland with ancient fertility myths and religious traditions, to highlight the contrast between a meaningful, heroic past and a mechanical, alienated present. Central to this vision is the motif of barrenness, represented by the Fisher King whose impotence reflects the spiritual and emotional aridity of the poem's inhabitants. By weaving together diverse cultural fragments, from the Upanishads to Wagnerian opera, Eliot suggests that while modern life is a fragmented ruins, the potential for regeneration exists through a difficult synthesis of tradition and spiritual reform.

Eliot's subsequent adoption of free verse and fragmentation in his later poems was well-received by his audience. This innovative style contributed to a sense of fluidity and comprehensibility in his work. Eliot initiated a rebellion against traditional literary techniques, establishing his own poetic forms. Where traditional poetry was marked by Romanticism and idealization, Modernism embraced greater realism and despair. In contrast to traditional poetry, Eliot incorporated intertextuality, snatches of dialogue, and multilingual phrases, lending an intellectual complexity to his work, though potentially increasing the difficulty of comprehension. Nevertheless, it is evident that he writes for an educated audience well-versed in literature.

In his later poems, Eliot utilized free verse and fragmentation, techniques favoured by his readership that imparted a more fluid and immediate quality to the work. This represented a rebellion against traditional literary techniques. Although traditional poetry was steeped in Romanticism and idealization Modernism that is exemplified by Eliot embraced realism and despair. Contrary to tradition, Eliot's poetry was made more intellectually challenging by the use of intertextuality, snippets of dialogue, and phrases in different languages, affirming that his intended audience was educated and well-versed in literature.

In his latest poem "Four Quartets", Eliot presents the perspective of a Christian thinker exploring the nature of time. His poetic concerns appear to have shifted, demonstrating a profound poetic maturity. This final poem exhibits a more spiritual and religious character, reflecting his embrace of Christian faith in his advanced years. Engaging in a spiritual quest for purgation, he juxtaposes human time with God's time, past, present, and future. As he aged, his reflections became

more abstract, philosophical, and existential, themes intricately woven into “Four Quartets”. It appears that following the spiritual void depicted in “The Waste Land”, Eliot brilliantly adopted Christian faith in his final work. However, he continues to employ contrasting themes such as fullness/emptiness and future/past. He emphasizes eternal time: the splendid unity of past, present, and future. Eliot also sustains the use of memory in his latest poem, intertwining it with specific locations and the speaker's desires. The destructive impact of the war continues, yet society is presented as seeking purgation. Crucially, he implies that hope and salvation reside within Christianity. He also maintains the use of free verse and fragmentation in the poetry.

“Four Quartets” represents a significant stylistic departure from Eliot’s earlier modernist experiments, particularly in its movement away from the “objective correlative” and the technique of fragmentation. Jones claims that “The Quartets confirmed Eliot’s already well-established position as a modernist poet” (2009, p. 31). While “The Waste Land” relies on a “heap of broken images” and an array of symbolic personae to mediate emotion, “Four Quartets” adopts a more direct, meditative voice, allowing Eliot to portray society through a lens that is simultaneously realistic and deeply religious. Eliot’s use of language here reflects the precision of a painter’s palette, vividly depicting holy sites not as mere symbols, but as tangible intersections of time and the divine. Despite this evolution toward a more unified structure, Eliot maintains his characteristically modern scepticism, eschewing Romantic idealism in favour of a dreary critique of contemporary existence. Ultimately, the poem signals a shift from the aesthetic of dislocation to a search for spiritual permanence, concluding that the only resolution to modern disillusionment lies within the order and security of the Christian tradition.

“Four Quartets” also reflects a shift in his poetic concerns, displaying a marked poetic maturity. It presents a Christian thinker contemplating the nature of time, adopting a more spiritual and religious disposition, consistent with his advancing age and Christian conversion. The poem involves a spiritual quest for purgation and contrasts human temporality with God’s eternal time, encompassing past, present, and future. In his later years, Eliot delved into more abstract, philosophical, and existential thoughts, which are mirrored in “Four Quartets”. Following the spiritual vacuity depicted in “The Waste Land”, Eliot embraced Christian faith, but he continued to juxtapose contrasting themes, such as fullness and emptiness, future and past, to stress the concept of eternal time as the unified splendour of past, present, and future. Memory remains a significant element, interwoven with specific locations and the speaker's desires, and while the devastating impact of war persists, the society is depicted as seeking purgation, with an implied hope and salvation found in Christianity. The use of free verse and fragmentation continued in this final work.

“Four Quartets” is the definitive masterpiece of Eliot’s career, representing his pinnacle as both a Modernist and Christian poet. It marks the culmination of his spiritual and poetic search, achieving a union with the divine. More symbolist and philosophical than his previous works, the poem signifies that Eliot finally attained peace through his religious and philosophical engagement in poetry. The poem represents the pinnacle of Eliot’s poetic career, solidifying his stature as both Modernist and a Christian poet. He ultimately discovers the fulfilment of his spiritual quest and finds union with God through Christian faith. This poem is more symbolist and philosophical than his preceding works. Eliot conclusively demonstrates a culmination of peace through his religious and philosophical poetic style.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that Eliot’s entire body of work appeals not only to the 20th-century audience but also resonates with today's postmodern society due to the universality of his themes. His subtle language, intertextuality, concept of depersonalization, and use of free verse are not only hallmarks of his originality but also foundational to his role as the progenitor of Modernism. Initiating a new movement and style is an inherently demanding endeavour in the literary sphere; yet, Eliot

succeeded through the enduring principles embedded in his poetry. His influence in the 20th century, both as a poet and a critic, is immense; the researcher, as a student of literature, posits that he is arguably the preeminent poet in English literature.

Eliot's poetry holds resonance not only for the twentieth-century society but also for the contemporary postmodern era, owing to its universal themes. His sophisticated language, masterful intertextuality, theory of depersonalization, and adoption of free verse distinguish him as an original poet and the acknowledged father of Modernism. To successfully inaugurate a new literary movement and style is a profound achievement, which Eliot accomplished through the enduring principles established in his poetry. His influence as both a poet and a critic in the twentieth century is unparalleled, leading to the conclusion that he is arguably the foremost poet in the English literary tradition.

Ultimately, T.S. Eliot's legacy is defined by his ability to bridge the profound chasm between the classical tradition and the fragmented reality of the modern world. By synthesizing intellectual rigor with emotional desolation, he transformed the landscape of English letters, moving poetry away from Romantic sentimentality toward a disciplined, objective aesthetic. His pioneering techniques, from the "objective correlative" to the intricate layering of intertextual echoes, do not merely represent a stylistic shift, but a fundamental revaluation of how literature engages with history and the human psyche. As the contemporary reader navigates an increasingly decentralized postmodern landscape, Eliot's voice remains vital, offering a framework for understanding the permanence of the human condition amidst the flux of time. He stands, therefore, not merely as a monumental figure of the twentieth century, but as an enduring architect of the Modernist movement.

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The author conducted the whole study.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Declaration and Committee Approval

In this research, the principles of scientific research and publication ethics were followed.