



An Obsession with Time in Selected Works of T. S. Eliot as a Major Modernist

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ABSTRACT

As a poet, Eliot seems obsessed with time: the speaker of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" keeps worrying about being late, and the passage of time in general as he gets older seems to continuously haunt him. In "The Waste Land" we have another form of obsession that presents itself in form of intertextuality; the many narrators of the poem go back and forth in time and provide almost random recollections of the past or haphazard bits of literary texts that are equally concerned with time. This article aims to look deeper into the importance of the concept time in Eliot's poetry, the two poems already mentioned as well as "Four Quartets" (in which a whole section is devoted to time and its philosophy) and then take the important works of other key figures of Modernism and the movement's characteristics into comparison in order to determine whether Eliot's seeming obsession is a fruit of its era or a personal motif of the poet.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot; Concept of Time; Intertextuality; Modernist Poetry

1. INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot is the well known leading figure of the Modernism movement and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948. There is a wide body of evidence available that shows he was obsessed with the concept of time. Naturally time and its passage are connected to death and destruction which are both prevalent in Eliot's poetry.

It is unclear however, whether this obsession was a less recognized characteristic of the Modernist movement or if it was mainly limited to Eliot. In order to investigate this question it is necessary to take a brief look at similar works in terms of time obsession, primarily in poetry but in other genres as well. It is also necessary to look deep into the Modernist movement itself, despite the fact that it has been extensively explored before. It is important to recognize the shared traits among those who called themselves Modern (or later came to be known as so) because if time obsession is actually not a major concern with them, one would then wonder what exactly it was that made them prolific as well as outspoken.

Modernism often brings with itself the thoughts of the First World War. Their emergence however precedes the war's outbreak and readers are now fascinated at how closely the writers of the pre-war stage had, in a way, predicted the upcoming bloodshed. As Wyndham Lewis correctly puts it: "All the artists and men of letters had gone into action, life was one big bloodless brawl, prior to the Great Bloodletting" (Gasiorek 136). Their accurate prediction is specially telling when one considers how important the concept of time is among this chaos. Authors who thought themselves secure in their lives were energetically debating a need for social change and several reactionary groups formed such as Vorticism, Imagism, Cubism and many others (137).

Despite their major difference in point of views and ideas, the one ultimate goal that bound them together was to change the bourgeois values that were so prevalent in their society (138). But what they got in return for wanting social change and intellectual improvement was massive physical violence that almost destroyed any clear sense of a society as a whole when Europe went up in flames. The difference between the pre and post war stage is quite easy to see when one compares works of the same author in these two times, for example T. S. Eliot's 1915 "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and the 1922 "The Waste Land". "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is published in the outbreak of war which is telling because the war is still at the stage when people that are safely away from the frontiers are busy romanticizing it, while "The Waste Land" takes place after the war has come and ended and has had its horrifying global effects.

Modernism was also simultaneous with the age of machines. What had started in the Victorian age as a rapid industrialization and the rise of great factories with thousands of workers continued into the twentieth century in the more advanced form of machinery that had crept into people's everyday lives as well as the industry. From the motor cars that the upper classes used to the telephone that was starting to appear in humbler households as well, technology was everywhere and it is no surprise that this had an effect on the literature of the time. The airplane was starting to become a common phenomenon and the gigantic Titanic brought up excitement even in the common people who could never afford a ticket for the ride, that is of course before it sank down to the bottom of the ocean with all its luxury and grandeur.

The writing took a new turn to express all this overwhelming change, to put "a stress on transformation, exteriorization, and shock" (Bradshaw 161). Although almost unanimously fascinated with this change, the Modernist writers were divided in their reactions towards The Machine:

"Some groups, most notably the Italian Futurists, were enthralled by its shimmering beauty and its capacity to transform society; other groups, the Vorticists, for example, sought to engage critically with the implications for human and social life of a rapidly advancing machine age. Various

individual writers (Lawrence and Ford, for example) tracked the impact of industrialization and the birth of new technologies on the individual and the community." (Gasiorek 141).

The significance of the rise in technology in this article is that it happened so quickly, almost overnight, and naturally it appeared to some authors such as Eliot that the rapid passage of time was at fault here. Many have come to view *The Wasteland* to revolve around the idea that technology has brought fragmentation in the society (Schien 91). It is therefore important to remember this notion when analyzing all of T. S. Eliot's works both before and after the war: **time is often the enemy.**

In 1914, when the First World War came about, the Modernists were again divided. "Those who never saw action opposed the war for a range of reasons: some argued that it had been avoidable, some were committed pacifists who would have refused to fight in any war, some were too old or unhealthy to fight, and some were unable to enlist" (Gasiorek 231) on the other hand, "[reflections] on the war by a non-combatant shows just how deeply it could affect those who experienced it at second-hand, those whose lives were touched by it even if they were not involved at the front" (233) . T. S. Eliot, like many other prominent literary figures of his time never went to the front and only experienced its effects from afar.

Literature Review

The subject of time has been explored in countless works of literature from the dawn of poetry. The extent to which each poet obsesses over the subject naturally varies. Some poems are directly concerned with time as a focused subject matter while others touch on the subject briefly when exploring other issues such as love or even religion and politics. For example Khalil Gibran in his poem "Time XXI" declares: "...the timeless in you is aware of life's timelessness/ And knows that yesterday is but today's memory and today's dream". Robert Frost in "Meeting and Passing" is the depiction of a single moment of two people passing each other in a country road. Milton in his "On Time" wonders at how time goes by so slowly in each day while one's own life seems to pass by so quickly. Robert Herrick in "To Virgins: To Make Much of Time" famously encourages young women to marry and beware of the effects of time on their beauty while the speaker of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" similarly tries to encourage a woman to make most of the time that is passing by so quickly. Byron talks directly to time about its "arbitrary wings" in his poem "To Time". Shelly laments the time that has passed which to him resembles "the ghost of a dear friend dead" (time long past), also calling it an "Unfathomable sea! Whose waves are years" (Time) and towards whom no force is ever effective. Walt Whitman in "To Think of Time" invited the reader to think of the importance of time and the fact that everyone dies. Emily Dickinson is yet another poet obsessed with time and its passage, and death as its result. This prominent obsession with the theme of time is not limited to English poets. Rabindranath Tagore writes of "Endless Time" with religious undertones, expressing how there is always a time to return to God, while thinking of the "Lost Time" he spent grieving, realizing that all time in God's hands.

Miller and many others agree that Eliot was definitely not alone in this obsession with time. Throughout literary history from St. Augustine to Shakespeare (Macbeth's many famous quotations on time), Paul de Mann (Rhetoric of Temporality), Wyndham Lewis (Time and

Western Man), Marcel Proust (*In Search of Lost Time*) and Samuel Beckett (*That Time*) questions on the nature of time have been asked and many thinkers have tried to answer them (Miller 86). Miller himself however believes that time is too abstract and philosophical to be worth pursuing in today's world (Miller 87).

It is therefore evident that poets of all ages and nationalities have explored the meaning of time. However, as it was said earlier, it seems as though Modernism experienced a renewed and heightened interest in time as an element that lead to death and destruction which is understandable once we consider how quickly this generation came to see all their jazz dreams crushed with the beginning of the First World War. This abrupt destruction that was brought on Europe was depicted in poems such as "Wasteland" where the very earth is shown as infertile and ridden with corruption. Although the age was dominated by Eliot and he was one of the very few lucky poets to become a classic even in his own time (Moody xiii) it is undeniable that novel was also a very important genre in the time, if not the dominant medium of the age. Novelists of the Modern era were mostly thought to have risen as a reaction to the writing of their Victorian ancestors. According to these newcomers the subject matter of Victorian writing had nothing to do with real life and the plot was far too simplistic (Bradshaw & Dettmar 215) so they set out to make a whole new type of novel. A different type of writing was created in which traditions were set aside and new ways were celebrated. Modern novels eventually came to be recognized (like they are today) as bright, fresh and ingenious, and in case of those novels like *Ulysses*, they are often listed as the best works of literature of all time.

The concept of time has been directly and masterfully explored in some novels such as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. The time-obsessed Quentin Compson spends all of his short life obsessing over the nature of time and the effects of its passage that is symbolized by the pocket watch that he inherits from his father, which he smashes to pieces right before he commits suicide. But the most important exploration of time and signs of obsession with time are seen in the field of narrative technique. This Modernist age saw the rise of the Circadian novel in which all events take place in a span of twenty four hours or shorter. Two of the best novels of the time as well as numerous others around the world are written using this technique. James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* both take place in one day, from the prime of the morning to the early hours of the next day. The significance of using this technique is that by concentrating the whole story to a span of just one day, the author is at liberty to squeeze as much thoughts and ideas into each character as he or she pleases. In just a few minutes quite a number of thoughts pass in a person's mind and change the definition of a realistic narrative.

2. DISCUSSION

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is the first of Eliot's many successful works. Though the poem is mainly concerned with a Hamlet-like state of indecision and inaction, an underlying obsession with time is very difficult to miss. The repeated statement "there will be time" dominates the whole poem's philosophy as the speaker contemplates a certain decision and continuously postpones it because he believes he will get more chances for action in the future but the poem's symbolic conclusion puts an end to his ambition. The speaker, Mr. Prufrock, believes there will be time: "Time for you and time for me,/ And time for a hundred

indecisions, And for a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of a toast and tea." (31-34) but then as the poem smoothly moves forward we see him slowly grow old and obsess over his appearance and all the changes that have been brought about by time, while some things seem to never change: women keep coming and going from the rooms and talk (pretentiously) about art. As his time comes to an end, he realizes that he might have missed his chance to act action, as even the sea mermaids on the beach refuse to sing to him and he finds himself symbolically drowning.

The theme of hesitation here is directly related to the passage of time. Prufrock keeps convincing himself that he will get plenty more chances (as we might assume, to propose to a woman he pines after) but eventually realizes that the best time for the action has gone by and he has missed it. This is one of the earliest examples of Eliot's obsession with time and its influence on human life. However, the poem is lighthearted and almost sweet, and one does not feel very sympathetic towards Prufrock and his lost chance because he spends his life going through tea parties and nibbles on crisp breads spread with butter and jam every afternoon, living a comfortable, maybe even luxurious, life despite the fact that he never acts on his romantic desires. He is now a diminutive old man. Almost the same type of man as the "Gerontion".

"The Waste Land", Eliot's masterpiece and his best known and most often anthologized work, was written only two years after "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", yet the reader might sense that the light verse of "Prufrock" has long gone and given up its place to a more reflective tone. The subject matter has become much more complicated to the point of being confusing. "The Waste Land" has been widely read as social criticism throughout the past century, as well as a criticism on the rise of technology and rapid industrialization, and yet this article aims in part to show that, the poem is in fact very personal (while the universality of the poem's themes cannot be denied entirely). Through the complicated allusions of the poem and within its fragments, it clearly speaks of Eliot's obsession with time. The passage of time and the promise of his own (and maybe even the entire human race's) upcoming and inevitable death seems to haunt him at this point in his literary career more than ever before. "The Wasteland" was born out of fragments of old poems to which Eliot added new ones and assembled as a whole and it remains deeply personal and reflective despite its "elliptical allusions and apparent detachment" (Chintiz 7). Some of Eliot's personal friends have even declared the poem his autobiography (Gordon 147).

The aristocratic (or formerly so) female speaker in the beginning of the "Burial of the Dead" is obviously stuck in the past as she keeps reminiscing about exciting childhood adventures and the luxurious life she seems have to lead while of her current status she merely says: "I read much of the night, and go south in the winter" (line 18). At the end of this section he clearly marvels at death as a presence: "I had not thought death had undone so many" (line 63) the whole melancholic stanza shows his dread of death which seems to him the inevitable result of the passage of time. Again the time seems to be the element at fault here. Almost a decade before the poem's publication during a walk in the countryside Ezra Pound, the heaviest influence on "The Wasteland", was shocked by Eliot's sudden declaration that "I am afraid of the life after death" (Schuchard 119). But how is the everyday reader to know of Eliot's frankly odd obsession? There is fortunately more than enough evidence in this gloomy poem to support this theme; the section entitled "Death by Water" is directly inviting the reader to consider his own death as an inescapable fact.

The long third section of "The Waste Land" entitled "The Fire Sermon" gives numerous references to literary works and religious texts. One of the interesting references that accords with the theme of time is the abrupt ending of this section that is taken from St. Augustine's Confessions from chapter XI (Adler 248) in which he asks questions about the nature of time and how it came about to be created. St. Augustine does not actually find any answers, being very puzzled at the position of time in the Genesis himself. But no matter how irresponsible Augustine may seem to us today, it is significant that he is one of the first important literary figures to ask questions on the nature of time and attempt to answer them. He is indeed yet another one of the men of letters who obsessed over time and its passage.

The last section of Wasteland or "What the Thunder Said" shifts to a whole other side of the world going all the way to India and the Ganges River where Eliot uses references of Upanishads, the ancient text of Hinduism: the god Parajapati is asked by his sons to instruct them and he replies through the sound of thunder. Each time he faces a certain group of his offspring (men, gods, and Asuras - evil deities) and enunciates the same word: "Da". Each group however receives a personal message from this same syllable in an attempt to show the readers that "the god's advice turns out to be self-advice that is elicited through self-awareness". This again reminds us that under the universal and social surface of Eliot's poem it is still very much personal and speaks volumes about the poet's own self-observed insecurities and shortcomings (Bloom 58).

Eliot's next major work, first published in 1925, is the "Hollow Men". Creeping through the more prominent ideas of pointless existence and desperation is, yet again, time as a culprit which is clearly present in the last stanza. Although only explored briefly, the speakers are wondering at how long their life appears to them, while for an entity that can look forward to an eternal second life, life in this world may seem incredibly short. This is directly followed by thoughts of the world's ending: "This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper (97-98)". These last lines can be interpreted in a number of ways but one might consider it possible to take the "bang" as the war and the "whimper" as a last sigh of a dying old man: the world did not end despite the great war that it went through, what is likely to end the world is only the passage of time which is therefore the more powerful force here.

Perhaps the most important of all Eliot's work when exploring the concept of time is the "Four Quartets". It is the first major poem he wrote after his conversion to Christianity (Anglo-Catholicism) and the difference in the way he manages his subject matter in this post-conversion stage is striking. The beginning lines the first section of the first of the Quartets (Burnt Norton 1936) is Eliot's most forward reflection on the abstract concept of time:

"Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present." (1-10).

Starting the poem with a philosophical idea rather than a clear-cut image (like a metaphorical patient etherized upon a table or a field of lilacs) is quite unusual for Eliot and naturally it catches the reader by surprise. He proposes to the readers that in order to achieve peace it is necessary to resolve the pointless conflict between past, present and future and instead to dwell only on the present and grasp at the belief that the present holds in itself both the essence of the past and the future. In short we might see how clearly he is stating that obsession over time and its passage is in fact quite pointless. He has now found Christianity and through this new-found faith he is able to see the world quite differently. The key to peace is therefore to seize the present: "Time past and time future/ Allow but a little consciousness./ To be conscious is not to be in time" (85-87) and "Only through time, time is conquered" (92).

In the next section entitled "East Coker" that was published in 1940, after the outbreak of the Second World War, Eliot focuses on nature and the human need to return to nature as a means of salvation while lamenting the distance between man and nature that has taken place in the modern world. He writes about the four seasons of the year and how they affect our lives, while also comparing human life to the change of the seasons.

Beginning this section with "In my beginning is my end" (179) is clearly signaling the concept of life after death. Its implications will vary depending on the reader's choice; it could refer to the pagan belief in returning to nature after death and being born anew in another form or the Christ's second coming. But knowing about Eliot's conversion it is much easier to view this section of the poem as the poet's new and improved notion of the passage of time and death as its inevitable result.

Death is no longer as frightening and gloomy as of was in the time of *Wasteland*, and the passage of time is not the culprit anymore. Time goes by and seasons change and the end takes place but it is not necessarily negative when one considers the possibility of life after death. This idea of resurrection appears to be taken for granted by the author because he ties this idea to the change of seasons: spring will always come after the winter.

"The Dry Salvages", the third section of the *Four Quartets*, was published in 1941. This section majorly builds on the ideas of the previous section by stating that there is a need for oneness with nature and it is only achieved by setting aside individual needs and approaching things with a sense of humanity as a whole. He admits that it might be painful, but also emphasizes that it is a necessary measure in order to achieve peace. To reconcile past and future and appreciate the present, or in other words the humans should work together to conquer time: "Here the impossible union/ Of spheres of evidence is actual,/ Here the past and future/ Are conquered, and reconciled," (608-610).

There is also a subtle assumption that world is no longer the grim place it was in the *Wasteland*, it is now much more positive and has within itself the promise of a good and prosperous life. The last section, "Little Gidding", is mostly the summarization of the ideas mentioned in the three previous sections and the same concepts are reinforced, and yet what is striking here is the hopeful and positive tone. The speaker of the poem is deeply aware of all the hardship that he might face but despite all of that, he remains convinced that through hard work (and maybe also good Christian faith) he can conquer them all, including the powerful influence of time.

3. CONCLUSIONS

It has been clear so far that Eliot is indeed obsessed with time and it has played a major part in his poetry, often dominating his work even when the poem focuses on an entirely different and seemingly unrelated idea. It is possible therefore to see that from the prewar stage of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" towards his "Four Quartets" (which is the last major work that has been explored here) Eliot goes through a major philosophical change. Leafing through his biography to investigate the reasons behind this change is not very fruitful. He was strongly reluctant to allow the publication of a detailed biography when he was still living and added a clause to his will, instructing his wife to prevent any such publications after his death (Moody 2). His reluctance is significant here because it shows he wanted to resist a biographical reading of his work as much as possible. But his conversion to Christianity is far too significant a fact to ignore. His perpetual obsession with time is ultimately resolved when he finds Christian faith; in the prewar times when he writes "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", he is not yet concerned with the massive destruction of the modern world and yet Prufrock is still suffering from the effects of time and the consequences of not mastering it. Eventually time passes and leaves him behind unsatisfied.

Soon after the publication of "The Love Song", a new war takes place and the point of view shifts greatly for the majority of European authors for a second time in the century as well as for Eliot. And still when he writes *Wasteland* he cannot forget about the question of time and its effects when he explores the idea of the upcoming and frightening death, its inevitability and its inseparable connection with time. But as we move towards Eliot's later years, and as Europe begins to experience a brief moment of peace between the two great wars, and despite the commencement of a new and even more horrifying war and social turmoil, Eliot seems to have begun to see the world in an entirely new way. This new attitude has been called conservatism by many critics and yet it obviously holds much more significance than mere carefulness at an older age. The philosophical conversion that takes place in Eliot's mind also goes beyond the limits of religion. The most important change is the different attitude that he takes with time and the mechanisms that he employs to concur it, while it is also clear to see that time is no longer the evil power that rules a man's life. It is now more of a benign entity that one has to work with and appease in order to go through life and then under the influence of a deep seated faith, become resurrected again and lives anew. It is then a very comforting thought that Eliot in his deathbed was no longer disappointed with life like Prufrock or haunted and desperate like the *Hollow Men* and did not feel himself struck in a barren waste land, rather, he was pleased and maybe even excited to transition into a new realm of existence, having finally successfully conquered time once and for all.

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