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# Exploring T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a Pre-postmodern Text

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## Abstract:

*Despite being a groundbreaking literary work of Modernism, T.S. Eliot's poem The Waste Land heralds the new era of Postmodernism that officially begins almost two decades after its publication. Although Eliot is one of the best representatives of modernist poets, his major work The Waste Land foreshadows some postmodern techniques and concepts. A seminal modernist poem of 1922, it can also be read as a postmodernist poem in the making. The present paper analyses some postmodern elements in The Waste Land and finds it a great epic of pre-postmodernist thoughts. Its intertextuality, fragmentation, discontinuity in narrative structure, and deconstruction of meaning put The Waste Land closer to postmodernism.*

**Keywords:** *deconstruction, fragmentation, intertextuality, modernism, pre-postmodernism, postmodernism*

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is regarded as the most influential work of modernist poetry. Capturing the vignettes of post-World War I disillusionment, societal disintegration, political chaos, and a longing for spiritual renewal, the poem reflects the zeitgeist of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ever since its publication in 1922, the poem has successfully captured the attention of galore of literary critics offering a rich tapestry for various interpretations. The depth and complexity of Eliot's work have ensured its enduring significance in literary scholarship. However, within its modernist appearance, the poem carries some elements that can be interpreted as precursors or influences on later postmodernist thoughts. As a poetic text, *The Waste Land* occupies a transitional space between these two literary periods. Eliot's engagement with fragmentation, intertextuality, cultural allusions, and scepticism towards grand narratives can be seen as precursors to postmodern literary techniques. This paper aims to trace out some of the features of postmodernism present in *The Waste Land* through an analysis of its themes, style, and text. By examining its major themes such as the fragmentation of modern life, the breakdown of societal norms, and the quest for spiritual renewal, this study also seeks to shed light on the profound impact of *The Waste Land* on the English literary canon.

Modern and postmodern literature are two distinct literary movements that emerged in the 20th century. Modernism in English poetry refers to a literary and creative movement that evolved during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was characterized by a break

from conventional forms and themes, emphasizing experimentation, individualism, and a rejection of established norms. Postmodernism, on the other hand, emerged as a response and critique of modernism in the mid-20th century and developed distinct characteristics of its own. It is a kind of "rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the past couple of centuries" (Sim vii). Postmodernism tends to be more self-conscious, skeptical, and fragmented, questioning the stability of meaning and embracing a multiplicity of perspectives. To shift from modern to postmodern is to also acknowledge scepticism about what embodies our culture and what it strives for.

There is no doubt that Eliot composed *The Waste Land* as a reaction against modern Western civilization. The worldview that Eliot holds in the poem is the modern world, traumatized by the war, is something disconnected and lost in chaos. Louis Menand in his essay "T.S. Eliot and Modernity" writes:

Modernism is a reaction against the modern. This definition does not meet the case of every work of literature or criticism we call modernist, but it meets the case of T. S. Eliot at least as well as any other generalization; and no generalization about modernism can afford to make an exception of Eliot. (554)

Similarly, Farahbakhsh in his article "Eliot and Postmodern Selfhood" aptly writes:

"Eliot's affinity with various and at times opposing schools of poetry, such as metaphysical poetry, Classicism, and French symbolism, suggests that we cannot confine a writer of Eliot's calibre to a single movement." (69)

Postmodernist writers incorporate intertextuality, pastiche, and parody, blurring the boundaries between high and low culture, originality, and imitation. Sometimes they satirize and mimic various literary styles, cultural references, and historical periods. Their works are often loaded with numerous references to other literary works, myths, religious texts, and historical events. The postmodernist practice encompasses borrowing and recontextualizing diverse materials. The self-conscious play with different voices and the intertextuality leaves the readers perplexed at times. This is the trait that *The Waste Land* carries from the very outset when it echoes Chaucer's opening line of *The Canterbury Tales*:

April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
(1-4)

Postmodern literature embraces fragmentation and discontinuity in a narrative structure. It may present multiple perspectives, contradictory narratives, or fragmented storylines, reflecting the fragmented nature of contemporary society. *The Waste Land* is also characterized by a fragmented structure, with various voices, perspectives, and literary allusions. Eliot's experimental techniques and fractured narrative reflect the fragmented and chaotic nature of modern society. This is similar to the postmodernist concern with the breakdown of grand narratives and the absence of a coherent reality. Although Eliot has

described the poem as “the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life... just a piece of rhythmical grumbling” (Unger 158), the poem seems to represent a general crisis in Western culture. The following extract from the poem testifies this argument:

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: 'Stetson!  
 'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!  
 'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
 'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
 'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?  
 'Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,  
 'Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!  
 'You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!"  
 (69-77)

In his 1923 review of the poem for *New Republic*, Conrad Aiken views the greatest strength of the poem to be its fragmentary, incoherent nature and states that the work must be taken as:

... a brilliant and kaleidoscopic confusion; as a series of sharp, discrete, slightly related perceptions and feelings, dramatically and lyrically presented, and violently juxtaposed, (for the effect of dissonance) so as to give us an impression of an intensely modern, intensely literary consciousness which perceives itself to be not a unit but a chance correlation or conglomerate of mutually discolorative fragments. (294)

Postmodernism employs a diversity of human experiences and a multiplicity of perspectives. If we study *The Waste Land* in this light, we find the poem as an amazing collage of different voices and thoughts. At times, the speaker appears to be Eliot himself but at other times he assumes the guises of different narrators like Tiresias, Marie, women in the pub, etc. The lack of a traditional narrator and the use of various voices contribute to the poem's complexity and depth. For example, line 19 of the poem definitely sounds like that of a prophet, “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,” (19-20)

A postmodernist work refuses to make a distinction between high culture and mass culture and between art and everyday life. In the poem, Eliot deliberately draws some serious allusions to classic writers like Dante, Shakespeare, Ovid, Virgil, Milton, etc. But at the same time, he references pop music like “The Mysterious Rag” in lines 128-130 and a nursery rhyme “London Bridge is falling down” in line 427. The allusions exported from literature, art, music, and history add further richness to the poem.

The deconstruction of meaning is a key concern of postmodernist thought. Postmodernist literature deconstructs established norms, ideologies, and institutions. It exposes power structures, challenges traditional binary oppositions, and questions the stability and universality of language. There is no notion of fixed interpretations. Explaining ‘deconstructionist strategies’ in *The Waste Land*, Ruth Nevo writes:

In *The Waste Land*, the fundamental categories of literary discourse are dismantled

or simply abandoned. There is no narrative, and there is no time, though there are "withered stumps of time," and no place-or rather there is no single time or place but a constant, bewildering shifting and disarray of times and places; there is no unifying central character either speaking or spoken about, no protagonist or antagonist, no drama, no epic, no lyric, though there are moments suggestive of all these generic constellations. (455)

Eliot, at times, has employed an ironic tone while addressing cultural and societal issues of his time. For instance, Madame Sosostris, the tarot card reader, has been portrayed as a fraud but ironically her predictions come true. Similarly, the speaker ironically asks Stetson whether the dead body he had planted in the garden began to sprout. It must be noted that later postmodernist writers used irony more frequently as a powerful weapon to express their sense of dissatisfaction and disillusionment. Hence, the ironic undertone of the poem takes it a step closer to postmodernism.

*The Waste Land* is a poem that explores themes of disillusionment, alienation, and the breakdown of traditional meaning. Eliot presents here a world in which language and communication have become fragmented and unreliable. "Like dreams, this text has no beginning or end. It could begin anywhere and end anywhere because it has no inception no center and no closure. If "Shantih Shantih Shantih" sounds like an end, both in the sense of telos and of cessation, it also and at the same time is only one fragment in the plethora of dissociated fragments." (Nevo 456)

I sat upon the shore  
 Fishing, with the arid plain behind me  
 Shall I at least set my lands in order?  
 London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down  
 Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina  
 Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow  
 Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie  
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins  
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.  
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.  
 Shantih shantih shantih  
 (424-434)

This is one of the most controversial passages in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It may lead us to question its purpose. According to Grover Smith, Eliot's "thrice-repeated "Shantih" must be taken as heavily ironic. If it is hopeful, it is the first word of the poem which is" (55). These last lines alluded to from the Sanskrit text the Upanishad, can be interpreted as a hopeful note that benediction is possible despite the decadence of civilization. The final message "Shantih" i.e., "the divine peace that surpasses all human understanding" leaves a positive mood in the readers' minds. Faith is all that matters at the time of spiritual crisis.

After this short perusal of the poem through the lens of postmodernism, we can

be sure that *The Waste Land* was a radical departure from the established conventions of the past. No matter that the poem is often taken as a legacy of modernist poetry, there are certain aspects of *The Waste Land* that seem to anticipate postmodern sensibilities. This magnum opus of Eliot has already signaled a new age of postmodern thoughts by challenging traditional notions of authority, truth, and narrative. Despite its modern epic look, the 434-line poem can be regarded as a seminal work of Pre-postmodernism that was soon to spread in Europe. Through its experimentation and exploration of new possibilities, the poem is sure to influence and allure many more poets, writers, and scholars of the coming age.

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