

Modernist experimentation in the waste land



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Eliot's "The Waste Land" is perhaps a prime example of the experimentation in poetic technique occurring during the period encompassing the Modernist movement. Loathed and adored by critics and students alike, the complexities of technique, language (or languages), subject matter and the sheer length of the work have contributed to the poem's status as a definitive example of "Modernist" writing. Along with Pound, Williams, Woolf and Joyce as well as countless others, Eliot's work clearly illustrates the Modernist idea of portraying objects and situations as they are, and not as they appear, without explanation and using techniques previously rubbished or indeed, previously untried, such as the almost prose-like contents of the poem, and reliance on cultural consciousness to bring about understanding of the meaning of poetry written in a stream of consciousness style. "The Waste Land" exemplifies experimentation with style and structure not necessarily purely for its own sake but as a genuine step towards advancing a genre which for centuries had been bound within self imposed restraints of meter and accepted poetic constructs. The poem is composed in 5 sections. This in itself is not a startling new invention, but the differences between each section exhibit perhaps the most basic of the "new" techniques Eliot employs. The change of narrative voice and of scene in each of the parts is confusing, strange, complex, difficult to follow and groundbreaking. The confusion is further compounded by changes in narrative voice, and in places scene, in the midst of a section, even, occasionally, in the middle of a line. In the very first stanza the reader is left unclear as to who is speaking to whom. We are presented with several alternatives; Marie is talking, describing a conversation in the past; Eliot is addressing the reader in the last line; Eliot is describing in the third person a conversation between Marie and himself.

This last option seems plausible in that Eliot claimed to have met and talked with the Marie in question, the Countess Marie von Wallersee-Larish of Austria, and yet each of the other interpretations still makes sense in the context of stream of consciousness. Eliot leaves the situation open to interpretation, and this idea runs throughout the poem. In a way, therefore, Eliot issues a challenge to every reader, not to understand what he is writing, but to interpret and scavenge what they can for themselves. This was a key concept in modernism. Instead of spoon-feeding his readers verse detailing his thoughts, Eliot cuts out the middleman, as it were, and instead merely lays his thoughts upon a banqueting table and invites the reader to help themselves. It is precisely this lack of clarity which makes the poem simultaneously fascinating and repelling to readers. In this way there is something of a car crash aesthetic to his work. Whilst the language is beautiful, new and complex, it holds within its structure and even its word order a sense of horror and dread for anyone wishing for an easy read. Eliot makes the reader work for every shred of understanding, and it is this technique which inspires such obsessive passion for "The Waste Land", and such dedicated hatred for it. Until the draft versions of The Waste Land were published in 1968, critical interpretation of the poem was restricted to believing the poem to be a view of society, or a view from within society, in post-Great War Britain, a bleak analysis of the future of that society and a pessimistic view of life, love and art in such a climate. Whilst this interpretation is certainly still relevant, since 1968 examinations of the poem as an entirely autobiographical work have also become accepted. It would seem that the first interpretation of the poem is far more relevant to the modernist context with which this essay is concerned, yet the later analysis

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must still be addressed as it is certainly a pressing issue as to just how much of *The Waste Land* is applicable only to Eliot's life. This notion in itself is intrinsic to the modernist techniques Eliot is using - the use of personal impressions and perceptions to convey a message or to simply exist in their own right. However, as an observation of society verging on the voyeuristic, at times it would appear that Eliot is bent on illustrating the new and confusing nature of modernity. He calls into question society's class, moral values and sexual behaviour, as well as addressing gender conflict and differences throughout, a theme he claims in the notes to unify using the hermaphroditic figure of Tiresias in III. The poem links these attributes to one another and presents scenarios where they are demonstrated, for example in the lines 139-172. Eliot depicts a pub scene, opened with a discussion of an abortion (illustrating morality and sexual attitudes between the sexes) run through with suggestions of infidelity (gender conflict, sexuality and morality) and pointed references to sex. Here then, is a barbed satirical portrait of the "lower classes", just one microcosm Eliot uses to build up a picture, perhaps a criticism, of society as a whole. The intrusion of a capitalised voice during the pub scene is without doubt a new technique. As usual, no explanation for its source or purpose is offered - it is left to the reader. It serves as both the voice of the landlord, the voice of time and/or death, or the voice of a returning husband waiting for his wife to "perform her duty". There is another vignette at 215-256 in *The Fire Sermon*, observed by none other than Tiresias himself, whose entrance at almost exactly halfway through the poem is surely no accident, given his significance to the unification of the poem. The sexual nature of this vignette is used to expose weakness in the middle "white-collar" classes, of whom T.

S. Eliot was a member - he certainly associates himself with the 'hooded horde'. This particular section is uncomfortable in its close observance and the scathing tone of Tiresias' narrative. Eliot's sense of unease concerning the "modern" world is apparent throughout from the tone of the poem. Modernism allowed him to use juxtaposition to extremes - from the very first he sets the tone of the poem with "April is the cruellest month." April is springtime, a time of birth and renewal in the natural world, but here, in this Waste Land, it is recognised as being the source of suffering in that once born into the world, the fate of all creatures is to suffer and die. This morbidity is created and maintained by similar topsy-turvy images, all of which were previously impossible to justify in old poetic forms and techniques. And yet throughout the confusion and the conflicting descriptions and narrative styles, the poem remains quite obviously one work, and each part relies upon all the others to fulfill its purpose. Without one section, the poem would not make sense. Eliot achieves this using references to other sections throughout the poem, and uses the same adjectives time and again in different contexts to achieve a subconscious effect upon the reader. This manipulation of the subconscious was certainly a modern idea. The modernist movement was sometimes closely associated with psychological research conducted entirely separately from, but of interest to, the writers involved. The fact that psychology is another field of study altogether virtually guarantees that awareness of this level of manipulation in poetry was unheard of, and yet it is neither clumsy nor obvious to a casual reader. Using such a new idea to hold together the very fabric of the poem not only rises to the challenge of "doing something new" but also inherently communicates a sense of newness and weirdness to the

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poem, which manages to achieve its aim of holding the poem together as a cohesive whole. This is somewhat of a new twist on an old technique, an extension of traditional technique such as repetition or alliteration - an abuse, an evolution of poetic technique for the new age. The poem also wallows in a geographic structure. There is a sense of place throughout the poem, a sense of weird, twisted, changing and unfamiliar terrain, perfectly recreating the uncertainty of a changing, modern world. The desolate landscape frames society's downfall as depicted, and the poem takes a journey structure which unifies the poem and allows for the scene changes Eliot uses. This use of connections makes the poem structurally strong and helps it hang together under scrutiny, even as a back up to the internal referencing mentioned earlier. The most remarkable thing about "The Waste Land", and the cause of most of the apprehension regarding this particular poem, is the frequency and complexity of its allusions. Although poets and novelists alike had been using classical references to associate their poetry with a "golden age" or simply to make a point, especially during the neo-classical obsession of Romantic and Victorian poets, never before had such a range of influences, sources and significance been used to such bewildering effect. This use of allusion is key to the debate over the intention of the poem. Such is the obscurity and personal nature of some of the associations that many have been led to believe the poem could be purely autobiographical. Although the poem is packed with classical allusions it takes from Eastern and central European cultures just as easily, many of the confusing, perhaps seemingly unnecessary parts are closely linked to Eliot's own life (mentions of Margate or the sea refer, it would appear, to Eliot's time spent recovering from mental illness in Margate.) Even using Eliot's

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notes to “ decode” the poem is unlikely to be successful, given that although he was asked to supply the notes, it is hard to glean the depth of the reference’s meaning merely from an attribution to a certain book or religion. It feels like the need to understand can never be fully satisfied without reading every book Eliot ever read, as well as those in the notes, and this is the key to the frustration many readers feel whilst reading “ The Waste Land”, and yet is also the key to maintaining the poem’s air of elusiveness, and in effect, the key to its modernity, and its place in a modernist canon. Perhaps “ The Waste Land’s” intrigue is rooted in the struggle apparent within its lines, that of a poet grappling with new ideas and ideals, and yet producing a poem which flows and takes on a life of its own seemingly effortlessly. There are points in the poem where Eliot seems perhaps to have dispensed with technique, and indeed sense altogether, by introducing references and notions so obscure and personal as to have rid himself of the need for a reader, and yet it is the inclusion of such painstakingly researched references which also invites us to conclude that every word in the poem is there because it is supposed to be, and is not the result of a wandering mind or pen.