

Fragmentation and coherence in Eliot's The Waste Land



T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is an intricate poem that is intentionally difficult to understand; it contains a myriad of allusions to other texts, it has a fragmented narrative structure, speaks in various languages and utilizes surreal imagery. These features, amongst others, contribute to the poem's complexity. I wish to examine, in detail, how these features create or suppress meaning. In *The Waste Land* the reader is presented with a series of stanza's from several different speakers.

These different speakers give a disjointed, elusive account of *The Waste Land* forcing the reader to deliberate on what *The Waste Land* is and if a cure for this barren land is suggested, or is it merely enjoining the reader to despair in a nihilistic vision of the twentieth century. The poem is 'not a seamless narrative, but a set of lyric moments'(Donoghue, 121). These moments are broken up by different narrators, in different settings, that seem unrelated. However, this series of disassociated tales creates the desire to somehow discover the underlying narrative.

'*The Waste Land* seduces the reader into a search for the linear progression of conventional plot, for a structure more logical and unified than simply the "felt relationship" between focal points of emotional intensity.'(Kinney, 273)

This suppression of a complete and understandable narrative could be interpreted as form subverting meaning. The poem is disjointed and incoherent in other ways that could also be seen as form subverting meaning. There are various uses of imagery throughout the poem. These images resist definition; they refuse to represent a unified idea or concept.

They often seem to represent a set of opposites. For example, a recurring image within *The Waste Land* is water. However, water seems to represent both life and death. 'Fear death by Water'(55) and later it is water that is longed for to give life in the barren land 'If there were water we should stop and drink'(335). The various symbols resist simple interpretation. 'They explode and proliferate. They turn themselves inside out, diffuse their meanings, and collapse back again into disarticulated images'(Nevo, 356). Much of the imagery within the poem is also surreal and strikingly out of place within the narrative.

For example, such lines as: "' That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? '"(71-2) or 'in memories draped by the beneficent spider'(408). The surrealism within the various narratives is another immediate obstacle in the way of coherence. However, with closer inspection these literary features, that appear to suppress meaning and coherence, the surreal and elusive imagery and the fragmented narrative, are actually being utilized to create meaning and explore ideas in a complex and meaningful way. As I have said this poem resists interpretation.

It is only as the reader understands the allusions within the poem that a hint of narrative structure begins to appear. The title itself, as referred to in Eliot's notes, is an allusion to 'the Grail Quest mythos [that] was to form the fabula or the "groundplot" of this poetic fiction'(Kinney, 273). The allusions within the text reveal details that expand the poem, while also reinforcing the tone and impression Eliot has created. 'The work's very compression, its dense short hand of allusion which collapses into the text world history and

literary history, gives the poem some of the epic range of, for example, Paradise Lost.'(Kinney, 276)

Eliot went to the trouble of publishing notes on the various allusions to assist the readers' interpretation. The opening epigraph is written in Latin and is an allusion to Sibyl, from Petronius' Satyricon, who has the ability to see into the future; she is immortal but not eternally young. In the epigraph she is trapped and telling people she wants to die. This opening epigraph sets the tone for the poem. It also makes the reader aware that this poem is purposefully difficult and to understand it fully the reader must be aware of, or research, the texts that are alluded to.

Although the allusions give some hints to establish a narrative, they are merely hints, and do not connect the poem's disjointed sections. It is still the responsibility of the reader to interpret the meaning of the poem and search to find their own personal understanding. The Waste Land that Eliot depicts is a vision of modern society. It is defined by feelings of detachment, frustration and a sense of ambiguous dread toward the future. The complexity of this poem is representative of the complexity of twentieth century society.

It is frustrated and dislocated; it is exploring the emotional collective state of the changing world after the first world war. Eliot himself has written that ' poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive,

more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.' (Metaphysical Poets, 65)

In *The Waste Land* Eliot's use of dislocated language creates a sense of dislocation from society; it builds a sense of dislocation and detachment from *The Waste Land*. This sense of detachment created by Eliot's use of language is mimetic of the feelings of detachment felt by those living in post first world war Britain, and representative of his own feelings at the time of writing. *The Waste Land* can be read as a personal exploration, or it can be read as a collective exploration of life in the early twentieth century.

Eliot said that, to him, the poem was 'the relief of a personal and wholly insigni? cant grouse against life' (Eliot, V. 1). Here, Eliot states the personal nature of the poem; it is functioning cathartically to express and understand his emotional reasoning in relation to his world. If we 'read the poem as a statement of the poet's self, the fragmented wasteland becomes an internal reality' (Schimmel, 388). The poem can be read as both, a personal struggle to overcome the frustrations of life and to reconcile a fragmented sense of self, and the frustrations of society as a whole during increasingly dislocated times.

The poem contains the possibility of simultaneous interpretations, both individual and collective, that contribute towards the endless proliferation of personal meaning with each individual interpretation. The limitless possibilities of interpretation means 'that the reader can and must quite literally create it for himself.' (Kinney, 275) The various narrators do not create a single voice, but the impersonal fragments of many. 'We are

offered neither the poet as controlling deus artifex, nor any mediating “figure of the poet” within the text. Instead numerous proxy voices (both invented and borrowed) tell fragmentary tales.’(Kinney, 280)

There is no authorial or overriding poetic voice to guide or give the reader a singular perspective, instead the reader is given fragments of speech and overheard conversations that combine to give an impression. This impression is of detachment and apathy, that can be interpreted as the fragmented self or the dislocation of society. The different sections of the poem raise similar themes and create similar emotional responses; it ‘ offers a sense of parallel journeying, of traveling over the same territory but examining it from different perspectives.’(Kinney, 275)

For example, the opening lines of part 1, ‘ The Burial of the Dead’, ‘ April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land’(1-2), focuses on an area where life is returning, but it is not good it is ‘ cruel’. The opening lines of part three, ‘ The Fire Sermon’, could be seen as examining similar territory with a different perspective, it reads; ‘ ‘ The river’s tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf / Clutch and sink into the wet bank. ’(173-4) These lines give the impression of desolation. Focusing on a place, where once life thrived, but is now deprived of its vitality.

It is this fragmented sense of examining and re-examining that is mimetic of self-reflection and internal frustrations struggling to be resolved. The very experience of reading this poem, of trying to overcome its frustrations, that appear to hinder its coherence, is actually representative of the struggle of resolving internal conflicts and attempting to reconcile a fragmented mind.

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The readers' search to find order within the poem is also mimetic of the desire to find order in the world. To find order from the fragments of information or understanding that we manage to interpret in a chaotic, disjointed world.

The quest for order in this 'narrative of confusion'(Kinney, 276) leads the reader to closely analyse the plethora of allusions. These allusions are to notable, often canonical works. This is the process of discovering old stories, predating modernity, from within this tale about the bleakness of the present society. The discovery of order, however partial, from canonical works implies that great literature can make some sense of disorder, or provide the cure for societies feelings of detachment, and possibly even go some way towards curing *The Waste Land*.

The features within the poem that initially appear to frustrate a coherent reading of the poem are actually representative of the poems theme's on the frustrations of modern society, and the frustrations of dealing with internal disorder. The experience of overcoming these frustrations and successfully creating order from disorder within the poem represent attempting to overcome frustrations within society and within one's self. *The Waste Land* is littered with allusions.

In the first section of the poem, 'The Burial of the Dead', the lines, 'A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many. / Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet'(62-5), are an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*. Through this allusion Eliot is comparing the commuters entering London's business

district to the crowds in hell. The commuters in London are a sign of modernity, a recent development that is characteristic of the changes of modernity taking place in the early twentieth century.

This implies that living in modern London is like being trapped in Hell, a scathing view of modernity. There are several allusions, and imagery, associated with foretelling and the future, such as the epigraph of Sibyl already mentioned. Another allusion to foretelling is the character Tiresias, who has the ability of prophecy. Tiresias gives an account, or perhaps a prophecy, of an incredibly empty sexual encounter. This glimpse into the future, along with all of the allusions to the future, is bleak and unrewarding.

For all the poem's reference to ' oracles and prophecy, The Waste Land is more concerned with moments of aborted or suppressed vision - the thwarted apocalypses that prevent any of its " stories" from reaching an authoritative resolution'(Kinney, 280) It is moments of suppressed vision, gaps and absences that create a sense of dislocation in The Waste Land. Eliot occasionally subverts the form of the poem to create the sense of fragmentation. In the section 215-56, containing Tiresias, intermittent rhyming couplets, that change or disappear as soon as a pattern begins to emerge, create a vivid sense of fragmentation.

' The poem is constantly entertaining different methods of ordering and containing its language, adopting templates as diverse as the blank verse of Renaissance drama, the rhythms of popular song, quatrains of varying precision and succinctness, and even glimpses of the stylized periods of the King James Version. At the same time, as soon as anyone form is taken up it

is quite likely either to be exploded or subverted at the moment when it should attain some kind of closure, or to be suddenly dropped in favor of looser or more fragmentary verse.'(Kinney, 278)

The absence of a cohesive narrative, in particular, creates the sense of dislocation. The broken-up fragments of stories create a sense of a society in ruin. The Waste Land is made of dislocated fragments that represent a dislocated society in ruins. It is through Eliot's extensive use of allusions, and imagery, that these fragments are linked together. The allusions, and imagery, of foretelling run through the entire poem. They are often wrapped up in allusions to people suffering, like Sibyl and Tiresias (who has 'foresuffered all'), and this creates a bleak, unhopeful attitude toward the future in The Waste Land.

The conclusion of The Waste Land is somewhat elusive, yet I would argue ends with feelings of hope, contrasting the rest of the poem. The final stanza depicts the Fisher King, who is vital to the restoration of The Waste Land, contemplating if he is to cure the land. ' Shall I at least set my lands in order? '(426) Although, these lines also contain a simultaneous and opposing interpretation. The Fisher King may be contemplating setting his lands in order before his death. The passage then has a line from a nursery rhyme and a few lines in different languages, all allusions to various texts.

' The final lines of The Waste Land constitute a polyglot heaping together of references to urban collapse, uncompleted purgation, metamorphosis, rape and madness - a short hand compendium of the themes. '(Kinney, 282) This fragmented, seemingly incoherent, section is then reconciled by the next

line. ' These fragments I have shored against my ruins'(431). This clarifies the highly fragmented structure of the poem. This indicates that these fragments of great literature have prevented personal ruin.

These works are a remedy for the fragmented state of mind brought on by living in The Waste Land. The poem ends with the three interpretations of what the thunder said, and the word ' shantih' repeated three times. Eliot turns to allusions of eastern culture when galvanizing his despair of western civilization. The three interpretations of what the thunder said, that Eliot's notes give as ' give, sympathize and control'(Ferguson, 1355) are representative of one of the key themes of the poem; highlighting the importance personal interpretation and the search for personal understanding.

The fragmentary lack of coherence enables, or even forces, the reader to create their own meaning within the poem. Something profoundly powerful in a poem about the artificiality and meaninglessness of modern life. The final line, the repeated word ' shantih', in Eliot's notes, means ' The Peace which passeth understanding'(Ferguson, 1355). This is an uncharacteristically hopeful and resolute ending to the poem. Here the poem concludes that the cure for The Waste Land, the cure for the fragmented internal self, is inner peace that is beyond human understanding.

This poem resists understanding, and in the end Eliot praises the emotional connection that defies understanding. The Waste Land is an incredibly complex poem, that may appear to lack coherence. Its extensive use of allusions to convey narrative and understanding, its heavily fragmented

structure and its various dislocated narratives all give an impression of detachment, frustration and fragmentation. However, these are the very features that convey meaning and give the poem its underlying, yet overriding, coherence.

They also insist on the creation of simultaneous, possibly opposing, interpretations. It is both an exploration of personal struggle and the struggle of a society in decline, both seeking to be unified. It is ultimately this process of attempting to unify the fragmented, within the poem, that creates and mimics the process of attempting to unify a fragmented psyche and a fragmented society that makes the poem so powerful. 'Eliot is making us participate energetically in the making of sense'(Deane, 93) from fragments of literature and fragments of his imagination.