

A metaphorical
reading of t.s. eliot's
rhapsody on a windy
night



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T. S. Eliot once remarked that poetry must be difficult. The sentiments of this are expressed in much of his poetry and in his esoteric style, especially in *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*. If read literally, *Rhapsody* presents a bewildering scene of confusing, albeit beautifully-written nonsense. However, if read in terms of a series of lexicalised ideas, rather than a sequence of events telling a story, extensive and meaningful interpretations can be drawn. Therefore, it is my belief that a metaphorical stance is necessary to appreciate the full value of Eliot's *Rhapsody*. One initial example of this is in the title; the reference to a 'windy' night is not met by any direct reference to wind in the poem. However, if we look at the connotations of wind; change, transmutation and the ephemeral, this ties in with the first line of the poem; 'twelve o'clock' is the midpoint between one day and the next, often presented in literature as a time of change, perhaps most famously in Gothic fiction. Therefore the title is a presentiment that change is an important theme in the poem. Wind is also important in its ability to erode and to deform; this is reflected in the repetition of the 'twisted', which pervades the poem. Twisted imagery is used to represent scenes of desolation; 'a twisted branch upon the beach eaten smooth'. The sea also symbolises change, and the fact that it erodes the branch, which is a part of nature, may suggest that the poem is about the effect of change in subverting nature. Furthermore, the twisted is also used to convey the unnatural; 'smallpox cracks [the moon's] face, her hand twists a paper rose'. The image of the 'paper rose' symbolising man-made beauty juxtaposed with the personification of the moon as a diseased and damaged woman conjures the idea of industry and the artificial having a degrading effect on nature. Contextually, this makes sense as *Rhapsody* was written in <https://assignbuster.com/a-metaphorical-reading-of-ts-eliot-s-rhapsody-on-a-windy-night/>

the late 1910's; a time of a great innovation and development both artistically and industrially. Eliot's use of personification and reification blurs the boundary between the physical and the metaphysical, adding to the ambiguous and somnambulatory tone of the poem. The reification of memory ('dissolve the floors of memory', 'midnight shakes the memory') is particularly prominent. This 'captures the essence of an abstraction by recasting it as something more palpable'; the presentation of memory as a physical object suggests the vulnerability of memory as Eliot reminds us that like physical objects, memory can be lost, degraded and destroyed. If midnight is taken to symbolise a time of change, then the fact that it 'shakes the memory' may suggest that new changes are 'shaking off' memory, causing us to forget. Furthermore, the fact that the 'floors' and 'clear relations, divisions and precisions' dissolve suggests that in the novelty of innovation, tradition is fading away. Modern readers may be reminded of Santayana's famous aphorism 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it', opening up various avenues of social and political interpretation of the poem. A metaphorical reading of Rhapsody on a Windy Night has proved to be effective, as the reification of memory inspired the song Memory in the long-running musical Cats. Alongside the aforementioned personification of the moon, Eliot also personifies a street-lamp throughout the poem; 'the street lamp sputtered, the street lamp muttered'. The street-lamp forces the narrator to look upon a series of different images ('regard that woman'), and provides the only dialogue in the poem. This highlights the narrator's solitude, and his alienation from the society represented in these images. The anthropomorphic streetlamp and moon provide the only sources of light in the poem. This is important as light

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has strong connotations of happiness, hope and positivity; however the narrator's only source of this is artificial or reflected. This *mise en scène* gives us the impression that the narrator's relationships with others and with society are strained and superficial, further broadening the feeling of alienation. Eliot uses creative metaphors to create acroamatic and cryptic imagery. Readers must deconstruct these metaphors by looking at the combination of literal meanings, connotations and context of the words in order to develop images of what is being described. For example, ' I could see nothing behind that child's eye. I have seen eyes in the street trying to peer through lighted shutters' is full of meaning that must be ' unpacked'. The abutment of ' see nothing' and ' eyes' which have contrasting literal meanings presages discord and dissonance. Eyes are often presented in culture as being relatable to character; idioms such as eyes being ' the window to the soul' and ' mind's eye' are applicable here. Therefore the fact that the narrator can ' see nothing behind that child's eye' could be a suggestion of his inability to relate with others, widening the arroyo that Eliot creates between his narrator and society. On the other hand, he also sees eyes ' through lighted shutters'. In the context of the whole poem, this is associated with the ' female smells in shuttered rooms', which are mentioned with a nostalgic tone towards the end of the poem. This, combined with the previously mentioned connotations of eyes and light therefore leads us to interpret that the eyes he sees ' through lighted shutters' are a suggestion that his lack of hope and lack of connection with society may have been redeemed to some extent in women. Nonetheless, the fact that the eyes are only ' trying to peer', the physical barrier of the ' shutters' and the retrospect with which the ' female smells' are mentioned <https://assignbuster.com/a-metaphorical-reading-of-ts-eliot's-rhapsody-on-a-windy-night/>

suggests this redemption has been lost and is confined to memory. Eliot presents the poem as a stream of consciousness with a free metre and stanzas of differing line lengths. The consolidation of these structural features, the use of creative metaphor and touches of magic realism ('lunar incantations') gives the poem a dream-like and noctambulant tone. However, the short, staccato lines of the penultimate stanza represent a return to reality. The poem ends with 'the last twist of the knife'. This is a conventional metaphor, showing the narrator's transition back to reality is complete. This further use of the word 'twist' and the meanings derived from the phrase; pain and suffering, suggest that reality is worse than any of the previous images of the 'twisted'. Throughout the poem, age is juxtaposed with degeneration and the obsolete. For example, 'her dress is torn and stained with sand'. Sand may be an allusion to 'the sands of time', or maybe be a reference to the 'twisted branch upon the beach'. Though ambiguous, this image gives the reader the distinct impression of age and mis-use. It has been 'torn', therefore no longer fulfils its use as clothing. Similarly, the 'broken spring' is described as old and decrepit; 'rust clings to the form that strength has left'. Its use as a spring is to bear tension, however it has become brittle; 'hard and curled and ready to snap'. This can be taken to be symbolic of tradition becoming obsolete and discarded, or alternatively as symbolic of the narrator, cast away from society like these broken, useless objects. The repetition of dust ('smells of dust', 'dust in crevices') is symbolic of antiquity and by-gone time, further defining the feeling of anachronism. It is clear that Eliot wrote Rhapsody on a Windy Night as an intentionally ambiguous poem, having the effect of creating the opportunity for limitless interpretation. To take Rhapsody at face-value

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would cause us to lose some of its inherent value. A metaphorical reading helps us to see its intricate web of imagery and to uncover the various layers of meaning which are hidden beneath the surface. Therefore, it is my belief that a metaphorical stance is a necessity in order to appreciate the full potential of Rhapsody on a Windy Night.