Ts elliot’s the wast land: metaphors and metonymy essay

Metonymy doesn’t substitute like metaphor something like the thing that is meant for the thing itself, but substitutes some attribute or cause or effect of the thing for the thing itself. As an elaborate and repetitive device, it fulfils two functions in modernist poems. It depicts a fragmentation of perception – which it in part creates as well. It also constructs a new coherence, one that is unlike the linear structure of the conventional narratives, but resembles a network.

One of the central problems of modernist poetry is indeed its attempt to overcome the traditional narrative, the epic tradition that brings with it coherent characters and personalities (like the epic heroes) as well as a linear view of history. Both of these points were threatened by the more and more increasing speed of modern life in the late industrial society as well as by the most radically disturbing experience in history so far: The First World War. The abandoning of epic tradition was much more difficult than the early attempts of the modernist suggested.

For example, Imagism thought to overcome the traditions of its predecessors by simply refusing to develop coherent arguments. A single image was declared sufficient, and narrative to be avoided at all costs (R. Stevenson). Yet the price that it had to pay for its radical reduction of poetic technique was its inability to make statements. As its name implies, images were all it produced, and this in turn displayed tendencies to become merely ornamental. Mere ornaments were not acceptable for the modernists who were keen on promoting their views of history and culture, in some cases religion as well.

New techniques of writing epic poems had to be developed which would avoid the pitfalls of traditionalism, since the defeat of tradition was programmatically declared the offspring of the modernist movement. In this struggle the metonymy proved the most reliable ally. In The Waste Land, metonymies are the bases of three dominant textual layers of the poem: its landscapes, its characters and its quotations. The landscapes of the poem are the desert (already implied in the name of the poem), the garden (which is the antithesis of the desert), the city, the river, and the sea, all of which appear in various connections.

It is difficult to decide which scenery is connected with which part of the poem, because all sections display different settings – with the exception of ‘ Death by Water’, the shortest part, which features one scenery and one protagonist only. The other four sections have in them images of sceneries in various combinations. They are used repeatedly and become significant through their everchanging combinations. In part I of the poem, ‘ The Burial of the Dead’, the desert scene of the very beginning is followed by a reminiscence in a restaurant in Bavaria.

This is replaced by another desert scene which is followed by an ideal garden scene, featuring the woman with flowers in her arms, the ‘ Hyacinth girl’. The last two paragraphs of this part take place in a ordinary setting for Madame Sosostris and a city scenery that already contains hints of the important image of the river (London Bridge is mentioned and the verb ‘ flowed’ is used repeatedly). The very end of its last part returns to the images of the garden and the desert which it links in the potent image of the planted and flowering corpse.

The effect of this creation of sceneries is dual and it seems contradictory. The poem refuses to create a coherent realistic setting. There is no landscape that could possibly fit its description. At the same time the text manages to build its own reality, one that is by various hints identified as a mental one: ‘ Unreal city’, the ‘ mixing’ of ‘ memory and desire’. The elements of the psychological landscape furthermore have also symbolic value. As indicated by the sequence featuring Madame Sosostris, there is an underlying significance to all settings.

Her cards show for the first time the Phoenician sailor who reappears in ‘ Death by Water’. The ‘ Lady of the Rocks’ called ‘ Belladonna’ is related to the ambiguous descriptions of women as desirable but also potentially threatening. Her name literally means ‘ beautiful woman’, but also a poisonous plant. The people walking round in a ring correspond to the anonymous masses flowing though London as well as to all characters in the poem engaged in repetitive activities without clear goals. The most drastic of them are the typist and the young man engaged in love-making.

The landscape metonymies of the poem are interrelated in this way and form a symbolic landscape peculiar to the poem itself. They also create a mental landscape of the text which can be related to the modern mind. The metonymies of the poem’s settings also establish connections with the characters who inhabit them, and these connections in turn create new structures of meaning with potential symbolic value. The fragmentation caused by the excessive use of metonymy leads to a complex semantic network. The same can be observed when we analyse of the characters of the poem.

Many of them appear only once and are then seemingly forgotten. Examples are the speaker at the beginning of ‘ The Burial of the Dead’, called Marie by her cousin; Madam Sosostris; Stetson; the hysterical woman in ‘ A Game of Chess’; the pub characters of its end (Bill, Lou, May); Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant; Elizabeth and Leicester. There are other who reappear, either clearly identified or thinly disguised, such as the Phoenician sailor, the Fisher King, Tiresias and Christ. There doesn’t seem to be any central character of the poem.

Like the settings, the characters are figures whose interrelation establishes their potential. The unidentified voice who is the dominant narrator of the poem does not seem to belong to any identifiable character, but keeps hovering between all characters as Michael Beehler says: For Eliot, ‘ facts are not, in the realist sense given; they are produced by… a “ system”‘ or by an ineluctable non-neutral, situation point of view. The conditions of that point of view are […] unexpressed and yet implied, and are acknowledged by Eliot to be irreducible.

What Michaels emphasises about Eliot’s pragmatism is the understanding of facts, of the universally and immanently real or basic, as determined by local “ conditions” whose “ transcendence” involves not their theoretical absorption into a higher whole but what might instead be called a lateral movement from one set of local conditions to another’, with each locality being ‘ in no way more self-conscious, no more able to be reflective about its subjectivity’ than any other. A similar observation can be made concerning the references in the text.

They also appear repeatedly, form patterns, but no identifiable statements, much less a fixed ‘ meaning’. Their function is to develop a common cultural basis between poem and reader, a shared cultural background. As Michael Riffaterre calls them, they are cultural clichi?? s. In The Waste Land, the poem’s theme of cultural fragmentation and decay is closely connected with the reader controlling function of allusions. Maud Ellmann calls the poem’s attitude towards its cultural heritage ‘ blasphemy’, which she defines as ‘ affirmation masked as denial’.

The poem exercises an ambiguous influence on its language, the medium that transfers cultural heritage into the text. Its reliance of the metonymy fragments the sources it uses. At the same time the poem creates new relations between the fragments, its own semantic network. This explains why The Waste Land has become an example of a text hardly visible under the heap of interpretations it has provoked. Again, the poem creates the loss it laments. At the same time it counters this loss by the creation of its own reality. Harriet Davidson describes this ambivalent effect like this:

First the poem makes the reader experience the absence of expected connections. This reader-response observation capitalises on the existential confusion which readers may feel and does not necessarily lead beyond the state of subject confronting object. Secondly, and more profoundly, the poem discloses absence ontologically as a state of the world, not as a state of a consciousness trying to know a world. This groundless reality of The Waste Land derives much of its power from the linking mechanisms between its layers of metonymies.

The central structures in it – the intertextual one of references and allusions, the lyric one of landscapes and other settings, and the dramatic one of characters form independent patterns of their own. They also melt into one another, so that the created network becomes very dense. The second part of the poem, ‘ A Game of Chess’, provides a striking example. It starts with the lyric description of a boudoir into which suddenly the allusion to the myth of Philomel enters.

This in turn is replaced by a dramatic sequence (although it consists most likely of a woman’s monologue countered by the thoughts of her male partner). This dramatic outburst is followed by a very different allusion, this time to a music hall song, the ‘ Shakespeherian Rag’, which then turns into a scene, once more dramatic, in a pub. The very end of this pub scene then becomes another literary quotation, the last words of Ophelia in Hamlet (E. Svarny). The merging of various forms of discourse in the poem is because it doesn’t draw a borderline between an interior of the text and a ‘ reality’ outside it.

It functions like the mind of a neurotic, incapable of differentiating between fiction and reality; and from here comes the egalitarian status of its quotations, lyric reflections and realistic dramatic scenes. The poem exists only for a limited public equiped with special knowledge. But that the public for it is limited is one of the symptoms of the state of culture that produced the poem. Works expressing the finest consciousness of the age are almost inevitably such as to appeal only to a tiny minority (F. R. Leavis).

On the textual level this corresponds to the extraordinary density of the metonymies. Their overlappings create areas of high density of meaning as well as serious gaps. These gaps derive from the combination of distant fragments and signifiers as well as from their displacement all over the wide space of the text. Johnson assesses it in the following way: The path to be followed by the reader is not the discursive one of plot development, but that of a vertical ascent-descent through the text’s stratification till resonance between identical signifier poles is set up.

The episode featuring Elizabeth and Leicester gliding down the Thames in a barge in ‘ The Fire Sermon’ is an example of semantic networks created through metonymies. First the episode derives directly from a sixteenth-century manuscript, yet its presentation takes the form of a lyric poem. The scenery evoked in the passage is the river, but it refers to the city as well. The scene represents the unsuccessful attempt to establish a functioning relationship between the opposite sexes.

It is set on the river (embodying time) in a barge (the fixed form maybe of the restrictions of society). Additionally, the sequence is mixed together with the refrain ‘ Weialala leia / Wallala leialala’ which is an allusion to Wagner’s Ring des Nibelungen where it is the song of the Rhine daughters. The construction of the metaphors in the short sequence uses the three forms of discourse: lyrical, intertextual and dramatic. This construction is then metonymically linked with other parts of the poem.

The frustrating sexual relationship for instance, corresponds to the one in ‘ A Game of Chess’, the love-making of the typist and the young man, and the

rape also to be found in ‘ The Fire Sermon’. In this respect the ambiguous ‘ brisk swell’ and ‘ rippled’ are reminiscent of the masochistic fantasies in ‘ Hysteria’. The theme of the polluted river is connected with the flow of people in the ‘ brown fog of a winter dawn’ in ‘ The Burial of the Dead’ and, more obviously, with the description of the river at the beginning of ‘ The Fire Sermon’ itself: … no empty bottles, sandwich papers,

Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends Or other testimony of summer nights. The Wagnerian interlude in turn relates the episode to the beginning of the poem where a quotation from Tristan and Isolde introduces the theme of unfulfilled desire. The Waste Land combines the metaphoric approach with the metonymic and there are interactions and the tensions between them. The first and constantly dominant metaphor is its title. It comes from J. L. Weston’s book ‘ From Ritual to Romance’. The Waste Land there has a significance in terms of Fertility Ritual.

The significance of the modren Waste Land is in the disorganization of the poem. It is related to the erudition and to the wealth of literary borrowings and allusions. The traditions and cultures have mingled and the historical imagination makes the past contemporary; no one tradition can digest so great a variety of materials, and the result is a breakdown of forms and the irrevocable loss of that sense of absoluteness which seems necessary to a robust culture (F. R. Leavis). The poem has many different meanings in the sense that it is an invitation to interpretation.

But it is more than merely an open text. As Harriet Davidson points out, ‘ the poem seems to expose the conditions for the possibility of all interpretations

of this text and any text’. It questions the very nature of interpretation and thus the relationship between text and reader and their status as interdependent object and subject. The poem creates an almost musical sense of movement, yet it doesn’t name or even support the belief in a goal of this movement. If it is a quest myth, according to Davidson, it is: indeed that of interpretive being.

The fertile land is created from the waste by the quest, but, as is evident from Jessie Weston’s book, the quester in the myth generally does not know how to reach the object of the quest, certainly does not know how to reach the goal, and is usually unaware of what he has done to bring fertility to the land. Often asking questions is enough to fight the barrenness – no answers are necessary, because non are available. Its confuses the firm expectations, which are part of any reading-process and questions the subject-object relation.

It thus creates what Davidson calls a ‘ hermeneutic universe’ analogous to Heigeger’s ‘ linguistic universe’, a world governed by interpretation rather that firm transcendental bases. In doing this, The Waste Land also questions the conditions of its own production. This makes it a milestone in modernism, indeed a crossroads from which the way leads either to the acceptance of this lack of groundedness as the starting point of a new aesthetic or to attempts to fight the deficiency with the means that have remained in the control of the artists.

These compensation strategies are the reliance on the material and the retreat into a linguistic and hermeneutic world. The threat of Eliot’s point

remains, no matter which traition artists and critics have chosen to follow, because it shows the basic paradox within the determining forces of modern reality: if the self is determined by language and language is determined by culture, and culture is surely a human creation, then there is a lack of groundedness here – a continual deferral of the origin of meaning. The human world is created in the desire to escape the absence defining our existence.

The symbols, myth, art and all of society attempt, in the endless elaboration of a relational linguistic world, to cover the absence. Lacan identifies this human activity as the ‘ metonymy of desire’, which reveals our lack of wholeness and sufficiency even while it tries to hide this lack. Human life is a constant conjunction of death and desire to escape death. The transition from metaphor to metonymy in Eliot’s works is a symptom of this attempt and the paradoxes created by it. The Waste Land is one very good example of this.