

Poetic Features of the Works of Thomas Stearns Eliot

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Abstract

Thomas Stearns Eliot, a towering figure in modernist literature, revolutionized 20th-century poetry with his innovative techniques and profound themes. This article explores the poetic features that define Eliot's work, including his use of fragmentation, mythic allusions, and innovative form and structure. By examining key poems such as «The Waste Land», «The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock» and «Four Quartets» the study highlights how Eliot's distinctive style and thematic concerns contribute to his lasting influence on modern poetry.

Key words: thomas stearns eliot, modernist poetry, fragmentation, mythic allusions, form and structure, «the waste land», «the love song of j. alfred prufrock», «four quartets».

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) stands as a monumental figure in modernist poetry, whose works have profoundly influenced the literary landscape. His poetry is characterized by a complex interplay of form and content, blending traditional and modernist elements. This article delves into the distinct poetic features of Eliot's work, with a focus on fragmentation, mythic allusions, and innovative form and structure.

The 1948 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, T.S. Eliot is highly distinguished as a poet, a literary critic, a dramatist, an editor, and a publisher. In 1910 and 1911, while still a college student, he wrote “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” published in Poetry magazine, and other poems that are landmarks in the history of modern literature. Eliot’s most notable works include The Waste Land (1922), Four Quartets (1943), and the play Murder in the Cathedral (1935). Eliot’s awards and honors include the British Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize for Literature. His play The Cocktail Party won the 1950 Tony Award for Best Play. In 1964, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats was famously adapted in 1981 into the musical Cats, which won seven Tony Awards. Despite his enduring popularity, Eliot and his work have been criticized as having prejudiced views, particularly anti-Semitism [8].

When T.S. Eliot died, wrote Robert Giroux, «the world became a lesser place». Certainly, the most imposing poet of his time, Eliot was revered by Igor Stravinsky «not only a great sorcerer of words but as the very key keeper of the language.» For Alfred Kazin he was «the man known as 'T.S. Eliot', the model poet of our time, the most cited poet and incarnation of literary correctness in the English-speaking world». Northrop Frye simply states: «A thorough knowledge of Eliot is compulsory for anyone interested in contemporary literature [2].

In effort to reestablish the tradition of the “intellectual poet” (“Metaphysical”), T.S. Eliot and the members of the imagist and early modernist schools employ a rather direct method: allusions to classic works of poetry. By incorporating references to texts that exemplify the “chaotic, irregular, fragmentary” (“Metaphysical”) style which mirrors one’s sensory experience of everyday life, Eliot adds both the historical context of the referenced work and the image conjured by the work itself to his own poetry [9].

A hallmark of Eliot's poetry is its fragmented style. Influenced by the disjointed realities of the early 20th century, especially post-World War I disillusionment, Eliot's fragmented narrative reflects the chaotic nature of contemporary life. In «The Waste Land» (1922), this technique is vividly employed through abrupt shifts in voice, setting, and perspective. The poem's structure mirrors the disintegration of societal norms and the collapse of coherent worldviews. Eliot juxtaposes disparate images and voices, creating a mosaic of modern despair and spiritual desolation.

Eliot’s use of fragmentation is prominently featured in «The Waste Land» (1922). Consider the following excerpt:

*«April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.»*

In these lines, Eliot juxtaposes images of life and death, renewal and decay. The fragmented nature of these images reflects the shattered post-war world and the psychological dislocation of modern individuals. The sudden shifts in imagery and tone create a sense of disorientation, mirroring the existential crisis of the era.

Eliot’s fragmented style underscores the chaos and disintegration of modern society. The abrupt transitions between ideas and images force the reader to piece together meaning, reflecting the

fragmented reality of the post-war world. This technique challenges traditional narrative coherence, aligning with modernist themes of disillusionment and alienation.

Eliot's use of mythic allusions is another defining feature of his poetry. Drawing on a vast array of literary and cultural references, Eliot weaves a rich tapestry of intertextual connections. «The Waste Land» is replete with references to works such as the Holy Grail legend, Dante's «Divine Comedy» and ancient fertility rites. This technique not only underscores the timeless nature of human concerns but also situates contemporary experiences within a broader historical and cultural context. Eliot's mythic framework serves to highlight the continuity and cyclical patterns of history, even amidst apparent cultural decay.

“The Waste Land”, epitomizing literary modernism, is one of the most important poems of the 20th century, portraying its despondent mood.

“The Waste Land”, one of T.S. Eliot's best works, masterfully exemplifies its era, his unique poetic style, and literary theories. Renowned for its complexity and fragmented structure, it skillfully employs literary, cultural, historical, mythological, and religious allusions. This richly allusive poem vividly captures the alienated, spiritually barren, and culturally confused world of the post-war 20th Century, epitomizing Eliot's sophisticated approach to poetry, as discussed in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” [10].

In «The Waste Land» Eliot incorporates numerous mythic and literary allusions. One notable example is the reference to the Fisher King from Arthurian legend:

«I sat upon the shore

Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

Shall I at least set my lands in order?»

This allusion to the Fisher King, whose land is barren and can only be restored through a quest, parallels the spiritual barrenness of the modern world. Eliot's use of this myth emphasizes the need for spiritual renewal and the cyclical nature of decay and regeneration.

By drawing on mythic allusions, Eliot connects contemporary despair with ancient narratives of loss and redemption. This technique enriches the text, providing layers of meaning and situating modern experiences within a timeless framework. The mythic references also serve to elevate personal and societal crises to a universal level, suggesting that modern disillusionment is part of a larger, enduring human condition.

Eliot's innovative use of form and structure is evident throughout his oeuvre. In «The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock» (1915), Eliot employs a dramatic monologue to explore the inner life of the modern individual. The poem's irregular rhyme scheme and free verse reflect Prufrock's fragmented consciousness and existential anxiety. Similarly, in «Four Quartets» (1943), Eliot experiments with a meditative, musical structure that interweaves themes of time, memory, and spiritual redemption. The quartets' intricate patterning and repetition create a sense of temporal fluidity and transcendence.

«The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock» (1915) showcases Eliot's innovative use of form and structure:

«Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table;

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,

The muttering retreats

Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels

*And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
Let us go and make our visit.»*

The poem opens with an invitation that quickly turns into a series of fragmented, disjointed images and thoughts, mirroring the protagonist's fragmented psyche. The irregular rhyme scheme and the use of free verse reflect Prufrock's indecision and inner turmoil. Eliot's form and structure in this poem reflect the inner conflict and alienation of the modern individual. The disjointed narrative and free verse form convey Prufrock's fragmented consciousness and his inability to find coherence or meaning in his life. This structural fragmentation enhances the poem's themes of existential anxiety and paralysis.

There are two styles of language used by Eliot in writing this poem *Morning at the Window*, the first is a personification figure of speech which compares inanimate objects to humans. The personification figure of speech in the poem *Morning at the Window* is found in the fifth line, namely in the sentence "*fog toss up to me*" which, when translated, means 'the fog enveloped me.' But here, the sentence likens the deteriorating state or mentality of domestic workers due to the adverse effects of urbanization, industrialization and poverty which also harm the upper class. The second is a figure of speech metaphor. There are two metaphorical figures of speech in this poem, the first is in the third line or more precisely in the word "*damp soul*" which, when interpreted, means 'moist soul.' But in this poem, the poet uses the word as a comparison which implies the unhappy state and thoughts of the household servants. Their lives are burdened because of a lack of economy, heavy with all the despair and unable to live freely. The first stanza describes the speaker's distant observations of the daily life of a poor housekeeper in poor living conditions. Her emotions are expressed through the use of negative words and similes such as "*trampled edges of the street*," "*damp souls of housemaids*" and "*sprouting despondently*". His sympathy and awareness of the hard life of poor domestic helpers is demonstrated by the use of the "*damp souls*" metaphor. The damaging effects of the first world war which stole the male workforce is reflected in the many domestic workers 'sprouting' at the area's gates [11].

In T.S. Eliot's poem «Morning at the Window,» there are two types of imagery, with the first being visual imagery that engages the sense of sight. This kind of imagery allows readers to visualize scenes that are described, making them appear almost tangible. The poem contains four instances of visual imagery.

The first example appears in the opening line: «They are rattling breakfast plates in basement kitchens.» This line evokes a vivid picture of the harsh living conditions faced by domestic workers, who must prepare breakfast for their employers in the basement kitchen. These workers likely haven't had their own breakfast yet, but the necessity of earning their wages forces them to complete their tasks, no matter how burdensome.

The second visual image is found in the sixth line with the phrase «Twisted faces.» This phrase helps readers picture the expressions on the domestic workers' faces – expressions marked by sadness, exhaustion, and hopelessness as they contend with economic hardships.

The third instance occurs in the seventh line with the phrase «muddy skirts.» This imagery conjures up the sight of the workers' dirty clothing, prompting readers to think about the demanding tasks that result in such soiled attire.

The fourth visual image appears in the eighth line with the words «aimless smile.» This phrase suggests a sorrowful smile, filled with pain and despair, as readers imagine the workers' smiles reflecting their difficult economic circumstances.

Thomas Stearns Eliot's poetry remains a cornerstone of modernist literature, distinguished by its fragmentation, mythic allusions, and innovative form and structure. His ability to capture the complexities of the modern condition through a synthesis of past and present continues to resonate with readers and scholars alike. Eliot's poetic legacy endures, offering profound insights into the human experience and the enduring quest for meaning in a fragmented world.

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