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Transcending Time to Achieve a Sense of Eternity in

T.S. Eliot's Poems

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Abstract

This paper presents T.S. Eliot's viewpoint on time. He considers past has an influence on present. T.S. Eliot has been widely appreciated for reflecting the sensibilities of the new age through a new idiom. Eliot is appreciated for his remarkable achievement as a pioneer of modern poetry and is hailed as a most prominent poet in the history of the world poetry. T.S. Eliot also presents theme of religion that is greatly significant in our present times. Eliot's interest in the great scientific discoveries of his time demonstrates how responsive he was to his age.

Keywords

Devastations; Dilemmas; Scientific Discoveries; Transcend.



T.S. Eliot talks about historical consciousness in his essay “Tradition and Individual Talent” in which he writes that even the most original artist of the modern age is, in fact, under the greatest obligation to the old masters of art and poetry. T.S Eliot has been widely appreciated for mirroring the sensibilities of the new age through a new idiom. New age is the time when the final break up from the pre-industrial way of life, economy and the human values of agrarian life, which was caused by the scientific revolution and the devastations caused by the two world wars which led to the fear that the human civilization may at any time be devoured by modern science, which brought about the changes in sensibilities which could not be imagined earlier. Eliot is appreciated for his remarkable achievement as a “pioneer of modern poetry” (265) and is hailed as a leader and champion of a new period in the long history of world poetry. Eliot can perceive the present society in the right perspective because of his wonderful grasp of the past and its living qualities along with his deep modern sensibility. Eliot had ardent faith in the past and he believed that literature must be read synchronically, with past and present co-existing and mutually interacting.

In many of his poems, he makes use of the epigraph taken from the past writers to underline the fact that past was not distinct from present; past too had its problems just like present dilemmas and difficulties. The epigraph of the poem “The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock” is a quotation from Dante’s *Inferno*, which arouses in the mind of the readers the memory of some Dantesque scene and thus establishes a relation between the medieval inferno and modern life. The words are spoken by Count Guido de Montefeltrano, whom Dante meets in the Eighth Chasm of Hell. Guido tells Dante, “If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without any further movement, but as no one has ever returned from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy” (XXVII, 61- 66). Guido speaks to Dante only because he knows that

Dante cannot go back to the world of the living beings. In this poem Prufrock too, takes his companion for a confidant, the first line of the poem “Let us go then, you and I” (“Prufrock” 1) makes it clear that ‘you’ is a real companion of the ‘I’ and both of them start walking. The ‘I’ continues speaking until the end suddenly the ‘you’ and ‘I’ merge into ‘we’.

In the poem “Gerontion” the words quoted as epigraph are spoken by the Duke who is in the guise of a priest and visits Claudio in prison and these lines are taken from Shakespeare’s play *Measure for Measure* (Act III, Scene 1). The Duke spreads the false news that he had set out for Poland, for he intended to know whether Angelo, the Deputy, who is entrusted with power to rule the country during his absence, is doing well. By the order of Angelo, Claudio was prosecuted and has been awaiting death sentence. In the guise of a priest, the Duke poses to console Claudio with the common philosophical truth that death is the only reality, that all our ideas about youth and age are nothing but dreams. The speaker in “Gerontion” is presented as a shadow of Claudio, confesses his sin as one is supposed to do before facing death. The speaker introduces himself as an old and blind man and it is quite possible that he is neither old nor blind, but “dreaming of both”. He calls himself old as he is lacking in youthful vigour and his “blindness” may refer to his inability to confront truth. The Duke’s words to Claudio reveal the nature of fear from which Gerontion suffers: “Thou art not noble; For all the accommodations that throw barest Are nursed by baseness. Thou art by no means valiant. For thou dost fear the soft and tender fork of a poor worm” (Eliot 95). The Duke speaks unpassionately and the speaker in “Gerontion” too, expresses his concern for his lack of passion.

T.S. Eliot has deep perception on religion which is greatly significant in our present times which is fraught with multi-faceted crisis. He uses the religious images magnanimously to commemorate the past to show its relevance in the present. Religion for him is very vital element in the life of

man. He firmly believed that religion transcends all our narrow conceptions about life and this world and it is futile to replace it with any other system conceived by man with his limited experience and knowledge. His poetry was pervaded by a lament for the loss of faith, and sometimes hinted that it might be recovered. A number of Eliot's poems contain the images taken from Christ's life to superimpose the past into the present. His poem "Journey of the Magi" presents spiritual struggle of three Magi who were transformed into new beings after the sight of the birth of Christ. Eliot associates this whole episode to his own conversion into new religion which was painful rather than a joyful experience, he writes: "I have seen birth and death, But had thought they were different; this Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like death, our death" (87). The above lines evidently prove that there is no celebration of the wonders of journey, rather it is a complaint about a journey that was tedious and tiring.

The major areas of reference in the poem "Hollowmen" are the historical accounts of the Gunpowder Plot, the murder of Caesar in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*; Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Dante's *Divina Commedia*. In this poem also Eliot compares and contrasts past and present to reach at a conclusion that this age is not at all a heroic age; the old heroes are now dead and forgotten, and if one is remembered; it is for the sake of fun.

T.S. Eliot not only owes to European masters but he owes a great deal to Indian thinkers and philosophers. One of his much neglected poems "To the Indians who died in Africa" illustrates his grasp of philosophical and pragmatic values of detached action enshrined in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In the poem he writes: "Let those who go home tell the same story of you of action with a common purpose, action Nonetheless fruitful if neither you nor we know, until the judgment after death what is the fruit of action" (To the Indians 7, 8).

T.S. Eliot in his master piece *Four Quartets* sees things differently; the life of time and change is seen in the light of underlying, spiritual absolute, a level of life where the two extremes of time and timeless are indistinguishable.

Therefore in his last work he presents the vision of a man who passionately believed in a spiritual unity. Eliot anticipates a spiritually revitalized world fully conceptualized in the *Four Quartets*. Eliot's primary idea- time and the timeless - consistent with the temporal qualities of music are presented in the opening lines:

Time present and time past,
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past
All time is externally present. (*Four Quartets* 1-4)

This image of time symbolizes the Modern Age- the grave digger delivering the new born child, the conflation of womb and tomb. These lines demonstrate Eliot's grasp of time, its spiritual significance, and its philosophically exasperating nature which the poet contemplates in the line: "time is eternally present", an assertion that lends to time both relative and absolute properties while conflating its various, fluctuating forms- the past forever disappearing, the future forever being born, and the present forever being renewed into a single moment. By merging past, present and future he captures the moment for future unborn generations. With the *Bhagavad Gita* as his primary inspiration Eliot moves forward in a continuous ebb and flow of time and eternity until he reaches the end of the poem.

Eliot's interest in the great scientific discoveries of his time demonstrates just how responsive he was to his age. One of time's most noteworthy features, observed by Eliot in the *Four Quartets*, has to do with its relationship to light.

An event's light, beginning at a specific point in space and time, spreads out three dimensionally into what science calls a light cone. Because past, present & future have been scientifically proven to be what is called concept, time and its co-conspirator change are only an illusion of reality.

Time again is the major concern of Eliot in "Burnt Norton" and in some moments, he gets the liberty to escape or transcend 'time' as we understand it

to achieve a sense of eternity or timelessness, or what Eliot calls the still point of the still point of the turning world (62). He believes that the past and future are contained within all moments. In this poem he uses the image of rose which is a symbol of beauty and perfection and the way time can manipulate our memories so that they become symbols of ideas. For example, a life event, such as moving to a new city, might seem much more significant later on as a memory because it represents a state of mind or a big change. The visit to rose garden was probably more mundane for Eliot than the symbolic moment he describes in the poem. This is illustrated, when the speaker and his companion are looking into a pool of water and see their reflection glittering. This memory of being in the rose garden with her may be significant to Eliot because it represents a time of beauty and simplicity that contrasted with the sour and complicated reality of his separation from his wife who had recently been committed to a mental institution.

The point that Eliot is making in these lines is that freedom from activity is never achieved by abstaining from action rather by performing detached action. Nobody can, in fact, ever rest from his activity even for a moment. The key idea here has been drawn from *Bhagavad Gita*. The influence of the Bhagavad-Gita is more particularly felt in Eliot's later writings. Beset by threatening problems of modern life, Eliot went to the *Bhagavad Gita* for solace and solutions. His deliberation was to find out a cure for ailing present, to seek for a way to regenerate and rejuvenate the stillness and inactions of present era. Thus, Eliot through his poetry gives glorious glimpse of past, relates it with present to finally unite the past and present.

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