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Metaphysical Elements in T.S. Eliot's *Gerontion, The Hollow Men* and *Ash Wednesday*

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Abstract: ***This article attempts to find out whether T.S. Eliot employs in three of his selected poems, "Gerontion," "The Hollow Men" and "Ash Wednesday" poetic devices that were employed by the metaphysical poets of the 17th century. Poetic devices such as conceits, metaphors, similes, paradoxes, unified sensibility, concentration, erudition, obscurity, compression, allusions, etc., have indeed been detected in the poems. With the help of these metaphysical poetic devices Eliot has been able to effectively portray in his poems the modern civilization marked by industrialization, urbanization, fragmentation, and moral degeneration. Eliot juxtaposes and amalgamates complex and disparate elements and brings out complex but meaningful wholes.***
Keywords: "Gerontion," "The Hollow Men," "Ash Wednesday" metaphysical, devices, Eliot

I. INTRODUCTION

Gerontion, in Greek, means a little man. It is the name of the chief character of the poem. He is a wretched old man whose mind is freely wandering, thinking about medley of things, objects, incidents and places. He is being read to by a boy while waiting for the rain to come.

On the surface, the poem appears to be a simple internal monologue of the little old man, but it actually is a complex and difficult poem. The poem depicts the decadent urban life characterized by a growing sense of futility, increasing materialism and decline of faith in religion and spirituality. Obscurity, compression and unified sensibility are the important metaphysical features present in the poem. Disparate elements are rapidly introduced and amalgamated in it. It requires some extra-textual reading as well as brisk speculative exercise on the part of the reader to be able to follow the poem. In connection with the difficulty and obscurity of the poem, Elizabeth Drew made the following observation:

> There is one poem of any length in the 1920 volume, but it is one of Eliot's most powerful, and one of his most obscure. It is impossible to read it without being deeply stirred by its strange drama and music, but to interpret the sequence of its imaginative logic is not easy, and there has to be a good deal of guesswork. [1]

The opening passage consists of a self-introduction of the narrator and descriptions of the house, its owner, a coughing goat and the housemaid. The introduction and the descriptions are highly concentrated, brief and in rapid succession; they have the potential for tremendous expansion of meaning and imagination. The old man has no glorious past; he had never fought at any war or battle. He is now a mere tenant in a dilapidated house that belongs to a Jew, whose only obsession is money and business. He is part and product of sexual degeneration and perversion. The lines, "Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp/ Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London." strongly suggest that the Jew had his origins in cities infested with sexual perversion and promiscuity that had led to spiritual decadent and sterility. The line, "The goat coughs in the field overhead;" suggests that the goat is in a diseased condition. And the following description, "The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea, / Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter" suggests the diseased and unhealthy condition of the woman. The fusion of the descriptions and images in the passage brings out a unified sensibility of the physical and spiritual degeneration of the environment to which Gerontion belongs.

The next passage is characterized by obscurity and abruptness, and apparently unrelated to the previous one. Without the aid of extra-textual reading, it would not be possible to make a guess of its meaning:

> Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!'
> The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
> Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year
> Came Christ the tiger

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The following passage is also packed with rich imagery of different elements and characters that have the potential for considerable expansion and interpretation:

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,
To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
Among whispers; by Mr. Silvero
With caressing hands, at Limoges
Who walked all night in the next room;
By Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians;
By Madame de Tornquist, in the dark room
Shifting the candles; Fraulein von Kulp
Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door.
Vacant shuttles
Weave the wind. I have no ghosts,
An old man in a draughty house
Under a windy knob.

The above lines contain contrasting and seemingly unrelated images that are obscure and highly suggestive. The perversion of communion service, which commemorates the last supper of Jesus with his disciples, is strongly suggested in the second line of the passage. George Williamson's elucidation of the passage helps much in gaining a better understanding of some of the hidden meanings in it:

"In depraved May"- depraved because of its more sensual beauty- came "dogwood and chestnut, flowering Judas" . . . The sacrament of spring, both natural and spiritual, comes to be eaten, to be taken in communion "among whispers"- a phrase which introduces further depravation. It is perverted by Mr. Silvero, whose devotion turns from the Lord's Supper to his porcelain at Limoges; by Hakagawa, who worships painting; by the Madame, who turns "medium"; and by the Fraulein, her client. The associative principle implicit in this passage is the perversion of devotion; and the action is universalized by a kind of exhaustive particularization, which includes the names of the characters. [2]

Metaphor, conceit and unified sensibility are the significant features of the poem. On Eliot's use of unified sensibility in this poem, L.G. Salinger says, "in Gerontion, he makes the effort of thinking itself almost physical sensation".[3] The three interrelated metaphysical elements, namely metaphor, conceit and unified sensibility are present in the following passage:

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late
What's now believed in, or if still believed,
In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon
Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with
Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.

The knowledge of history is metaphorically presented both as a confusing structure and as a deceitful woman. First, history is portrayed as some kind of huge building or structure having a number of confusing 'passages' and 'corridors'; then it is compared to a cunning person that tries to instill false ambitions and pride; and lastly, it is compared to a wily and deceitful woman who never satisfies the need and quest of those who come to her. Whatever she gives can never give satisfaction. It is always accompanied by confusion; instead of satisfying the hunger it increases its intensity; the giving is 'too late' or 'too soon'; and it falls into the hands of weak persons.

At the end of the passage, two paradoxes are given. The first paradox is that the so-called heroic events like war often give birth to crimes and wickedness. The second paradox talks about the possibility of learning good lessons from great blunders. For example, 'impudent crimes' can lead to change of old habits and adoption of honorable 'virtues'. On the overall metaphysicality of the above passage, L.G. Salinger made the following observation:

This passage, with its quick interplay between sound, metaphor and idea, shows Eliot triumphantly applying his study of the Jacobean dramatists. And it shows what he means in his own practice by 'metaphysical' quality or texture in verse, the quality he describes as 'a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling'. [4]

Thus, the analysis of the poem has revealed that the poem is rich in metaphysical elements like obscurity, compression, unified sensibility, metaphors, conceits and paradoxes.

The Hollow Men was published in its present form in 1925. According to George Williamson, the title of the poem has been derived from the combination of *The Hollow Land* by William Morris and *The Broken Men* by Kipling. George Williamson also expresses his belief that it could have come from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. [5]

The poem is provided with two epigraphs that refer to Mistah Kurtz and Guy Fawkes. Mistah Kurtz was a white man who was an agent of a trading company in a very remote and backward area of Africa. But, Kurtz became addicted to drinking and began to lead the life of a savage; he became a tyrant among the natives of Africa. Ultimately, he met a violent death knowingly and intentionally. Guy Fawkes was another violent man who was directly involved in the *Gun Powder Plot* which was intended to blow up the English Parliament to capture power by killing King James I and his ministers. However, the plot failed. Guy Fawkes was arrested, hanged and his body was burnt to ashes. Ever since then, a celebration has been held every year to commemorate the event. During the celebration, boys in the midst of noisy fireworks burn his straw-stuffed effigy. The expenses for the celebration came from door to door begging of pennies done by the boys. The epigraph, "A penny for the old Guy" has been derived from this annual celebration. Mistah Kurtz and Guy Fawkes, although evil and violent, were men of action and firm resolve. On the other hand, the hollow men in the poem with the same title are characterized by emptiness, hollowness, futility and meaninglessness. The hollow men are, at the best, comparable to the straw-filled effigy of Guy Fawkes.

The poem is rich in imageries, metaphors, similes and paradoxes. It opens with a powerful imagery that depicts the spiritual emptiness and inertia of the denizens of the modern wasteland:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar
Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

The above lines contain a powerful imagery in which the wastelanders describe themselves as hollow men and stuffed men that lean together. They compare themselves to headpiece filled with straw; and their voices are like wind in dry grass. They also paradoxically describe themselves as formless shape, colorless shade, paralyzed force and motionless gesture. These metaphors, similes and paradoxes bear close resemblance to the metaphysical conceits.

Again, the first passage of the second section of the poem contains a rich imagery:

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom
These do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column

There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

The narrator does not dare to meet the 'direct eyes' in dreams. These 'eyes', the narrator says, "do not appear in 'death's dream kingdom." The eyes that appear in that kingdom are extremely weak. They are metaphorically described as 'Sunlight on a broken column'. And the voices singing in the wind are said to be 'More distant and more solemn/ Than a fading star." This comparison of the singing voices to a distant fading star is far-fetched and is comparable to a metaphysical conceit.

The first passage of the third section of the poem is also rich in imagery:

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of the dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.

The land of the hollow men is described as "dead land" and "cactus land" where "stone images" are worshipped by the dead man under the dim twinkling light of a "fading star". With the employment of this imagery, Eliot effectively presents the spiritual emptiness and futility of the hollow men, who are the denizens of the modern waste land.

Ash Wednesday is the next poem to be analyzed. After his conversion to the Church of England in 1927, Eliot began to take keener interest in writing religious poetry. Eliot's earlier poems too contained religious elements; but they were less direct and more on negative note. His post-conversion poetry deals with religious themes more directly and in a more positive manner. *Ash Wednesday* was one of Eliot's major post-conversion poems. The poem has six sections that appeared as separate poems in between 1927 and 1929 and as a single poem in 1930. The title of the poem refers to the first day of the six-week period of fasting and prayer in the Christian calendar known as Lent. During this period the penitent Christian fasts and prays to receive forgiveness for the sins he had committed in the past.

Ash Wednesday depicts the poet's experience of both hope and despair as he struggles to turn away from the attraction of the sensual world and move towards God. He is caught in the conflict between material and spiritual interests. Like a metaphysical poem, the poem is complex, obscure and rich in imageries and symbolism. Although its language is quite simple, it contains complicated theological ideas that are highly compressed and allusive. With regard to the difficulty of the poem, Elizabeth Drew made the following comment:

> The poem as a whole has much that is mysterious and ambiguous in it, in spite of several elucidations, and we cannot hope to find any easy allegorical content of the various symbols. They remain 'completely opalescent,' as do the constantly shifting moods and tone. [6]

Grover Smith points out that *Ash Wednesday* is very similar to *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* in its disjointedness. But, he adds, "*Ash Wednesday* has dramatic unity and even more than *The Waste Land* a precise temporal focus". [7]

A bracketed line in the first stanza of the poem contains an impressive metaphor, "(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)". Here, the protagonist refers to himself as an "aged eagle" that has lost its power. Like an 'aged eagle', he has renounced all sensual pleasures and has resigned to his present paradoxical situation. He has lost all hopes of ever experiencing sensual pleasures again; yet, he is hopeful that he will be able to construct a meaningful spiritual life through prayer and God's mercy.

Again, the four lines that occur at the close of the first section contain a comparison that is very similar with a metaphysical conceit:

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will

Here, the wings are compared to vans that cannot fly but only meant to beat the air. The air is thoroughly small and dry; it is smaller and dryer than the will. These comparisons of the wings to the vans and air to the will are fantastic and far-fetched like metaphysical conceits.

The opening lines of the second section also contain a vivid imagery:

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree
In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety
On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained
In the hollow round of my skull.

The imagery in the above passage is graphic and evocative. Thought and feeling seem to be merged and a unified sensibility is created. The phrases, “three white leopards”, “juniper tree”, “the cool of the day”, “fed to satiety” and the different body parts of the protagonist that had been devoured produce a unified sensibility or a new complex whole.

Paradox is another metaphysical device that is employed in this poem. The following is a sterling paradoxical passage:

Lady of silences
Calm and distressed
Torn and most whole
Rose of memory
Rose of forgetfulness
Exhausted and life-giving
Worried reposeful
The single Rose
Is now the Garden
Where all loves end
Terminate torment
Of love unsatisfied
The greater torment
Of love unsatisfied
End of the endless
Journey to no end
Conclusion of all that
Is inconclusible
Speech without word and
Word of no speech
Grace to the Mother
For the Garden
Where all love ends.

Here, the lady of silences is described as possessing a number of paradoxical qualities. She displays both negative and positive characteristics. She is both ‘calm and distressed’, ‘torn and most whole’; she is ‘rose of memory as well as of forgetfulness’; she is ‘exhausted’ and ‘life-giving’; and she is ‘worried and reposeful’. She is first presented as a lady, then as a single rose, and lastly as a garden. In this garden ‘torment of love unsatisfied’ and ‘the greater torment of love satisfied’ are terminated. In the garden, there is the ‘end of the endless’ and the ‘conclusion of all that is inconclusible’.

All the contradictory and paradoxical elements are resolved and a new unified whole is formed. Hence, in this passage, two important metaphysical elements, namely paradoxes and unified sensibility are present.

Another conceit occurs in the second passage of the third section of the poem:

At the second turning of the second stair
I left them twisting, turning below;
There were no more faces and the stair was dark,
Damp, jagged, like an old man's mouth drivelling, beyond repair,
Or the toothed gullet of an aged shark.

The stair is brilliantly compared to the driveling mouth of an old man and 'the toothed gullet of an aged shark', which suggests that the stair is very old and in a dilapidated shape. Although it may not be accurate to regard this comparison as a conceit, the powerful and effective imagery created out of it bears a close resemblance to a metaphysical imagery.

Another simile occurs in the lines, "At the first turning of the third stair/ Was a slotted window bellied like the fig's fruit." This comparison of the window to a fig's fruit is undoubtedly fantastic and far-fetched like a metaphysical conceit.

Obscurity too is an important characteristic of the poem. The first passage of the fifth section is shrouded in obscurity and mystery:

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
If the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, The Word within
The world and for the world;
And the light shown in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.

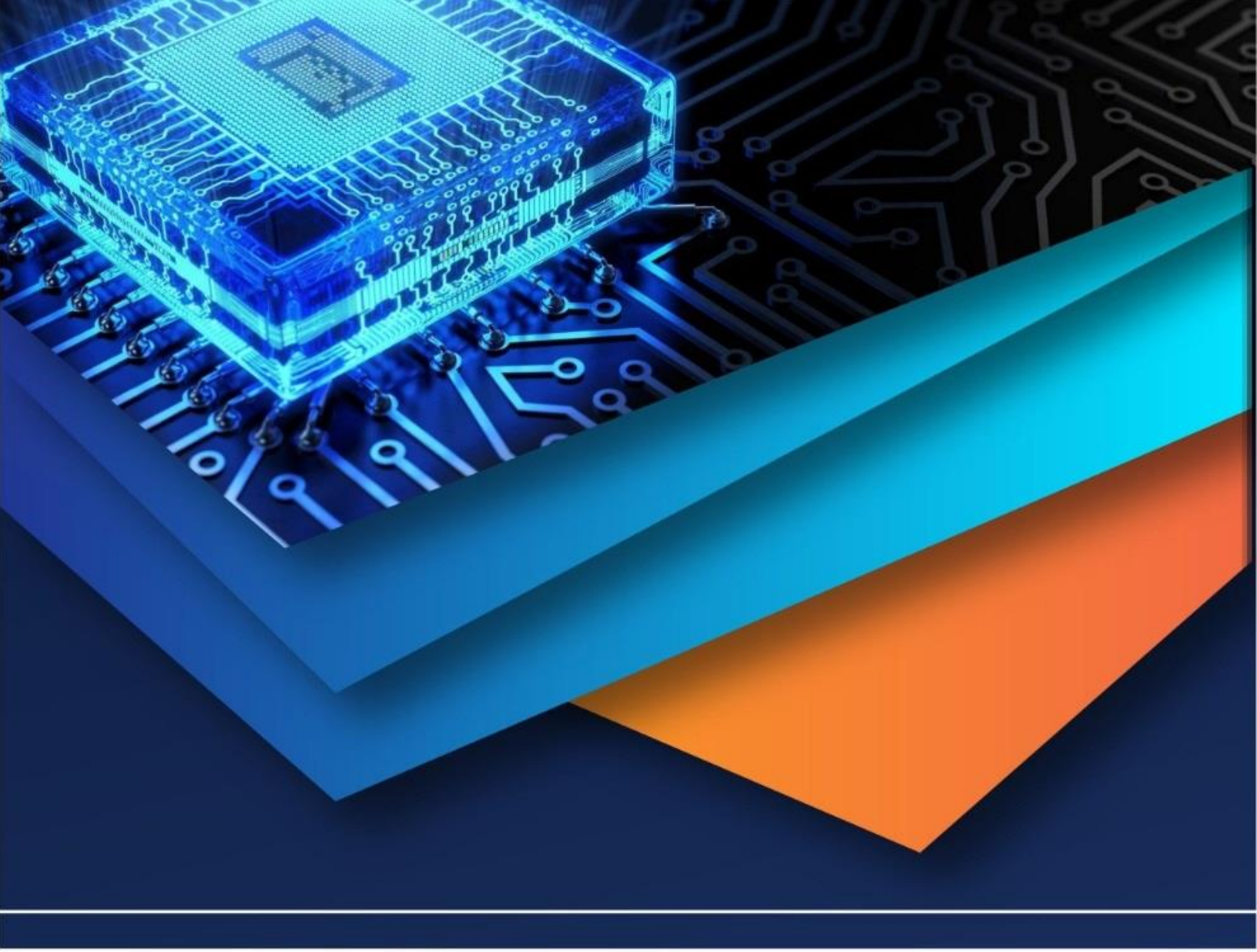
This passage requires the help of non-textual source in order for the reader to be able to get some clue to its hidden meaning. The passage seems to allude to the opening verses of the book of John in the Bible, which say that the Word was with God in the beginning, the Word was God, and the Word finally incarnated in the form of a human being and lived among humankind.

Like some of the religious poems written by John Donne and George Herbert, *Ash Wednesday* also contains direct references to God and prayer:

Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
Upon which to rejoice
And pray to God to have mercy upon us
And I pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain

NOTES

[1] Elizabeth Drew, T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry (Delhi: Doaba House, 2000) 47
[2] George Williamson, A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965) 109.
[3] Boris Ford, ed., The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, vol.7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Lmt, 1983) 449.
[4] Boris Ford, ed., The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, vol.7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Lmt, 1983) 449.
[5] George Williamson, A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965) 154.
[6] Elizabeth Drew, T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry (Delhi: Doaba House, 2000) 102.
[7] Grover Smith, T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971) 135.



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