

Between Sight and Spirit: Visualizing Abstract Realities in Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

Images are similes and metaphors that are always used by the poets either to communicate their meaning or to decorate their language. It is by the use of images that abstract ideas or emotional states can be conveyed accurately and clearly to the readers. The image in a poem gives quality, creates atmosphere and conveys emotion. The images are an expression of the poet's awareness through senses, of the world around him. They are also an expression of poet's relation to what they perceive through their senses.

Images are the very life of Eliot's poetry. The continuous use of images is perhaps the most striking attribute of his poetry. They are drawn from a wide variety of interacts embracing his varied reading and direct observations of life. An unusual correctness and clarity make his image lively and unforgettable. They can be called usually visual images or the images that strike the mind's eye. Eliot never says anything direct but through images. He largely employs imagery in poetry. Eliot's use of imagery is directed to clarify subtle and spiritual ideas. Eliot is concerned with the complexities of modern civilization and such complexities can be made clear by means of comparison with concrete or physical things. Furthermore, they tend to ensure the poet's faithfulness to their experiences. Present paper is an attempt to point out the pivotal points of Eliot's usage of imagery in his perpetual poem *The Waste Land*.

Key Words: Images, Objective correlatives, picture images, elements of surprise, sources

“An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”- Ezra Pound

Image is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously, which provides the sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from deadlines and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience within the greatest works of art. The imagists wished to move away from the ambiguous terminology of "the ideal" prevalent in a number of symbolist poetry. However, imagism for Pound did not necessarily mean description:

Don't be descriptive; remember that the painter can describe a landscape much better than you can, and that he has to know a good deal more about it.

When Shakespeare talks of the 'Dawn in russet mantle clad' he presents something which the painter does not present. There is in the line nothing, which can be called description; he presents.

Images are similes and metaphors that are always used by the poets either to communicate their meaning or to decorate their language. It is by the utilization of images that abstract ideas or emotional states are often conveyed accurately and clearly to the readers. The image in a poem gives quality, creates atmosphere and conveys emotion. The images are an expression of the poet's awareness through senses, of the world around him. They are also an expression of poet's relation to what they perceive through their senses.

An image may be metaphorical language where at least two concepts from different areas of experience meet in a single word or sentence. An image can also be a verbal embodiment of thought and feeling. An image may be a single word and thus correspond to a metaphor. It may be an explicit comparison with the two terms synthetically linked a "simile". It may be personification, a sub-species of metaphor. In fact, it may, be any verbal figure of speech. The simple image is verbal comparison. A complex image may be a fusion of simple images. The essential quality and function of imagery is a kind of creation, by the bringing together of diverse objects, states of mind or concepts. New relationships are discovered between new connections, subject and object become apparent, new thoughts spring into being. An image in poetry is a word or expression, which appears directly to the eye, the ear or the sense taste, touch and smell.

Simply an image is a sensory perception of something abstract. “My love is like a red, red rose” which is a simple comparison is still much richer than any explanation of it. The reader is not merely informed of the beauty of the beloved but, is being invited to respond in many ways, to the color, to the attractiveness, to the striking shade, to the passionate red, to the insistent nature (red, red) of the color, to the traditional associations of the rose, and further he is asked to create for himself the vision of the women’s beauty in terms of his experience.

For our convenience image can be classified as – images familiar, images graphic, images exotic and images suggestive. Images familiar are images, which are drawn from eye’s familiar experiences. Graphic images are those images, which convey the movements, especially, of animals and birds. Exotic images are those which clothe the ordinary with extraordinary. The images suggestive are used to define abstract thoughts in a concrete manner leading the readers on the tangible conclusions.

Images are the very life of Eliot’s poetry. The continuous use of images is perhaps the most striking attribute of his poetry. They are drawn from a wide variety of interacts embracing his varied reading and direct observations of life. An unusual correctness and clarity make his image lively and unforgettable. They can be called usually visual images or the images that strike the mind’s eye. Eliot never says anything direct but through images. He largely employs imagery in poetry. Eliot’s use of imagery is directed to clarify subtle and spiritual ideas. Eliot is concerned with the complexities of modern civilization and such complexities can be made crystal clear by means of comparison with concrete or physical things. Moreover, they tend to secure the fidelity of the experiences of the poet.

For Eliot the use of imagery is of great importance since its quality is one of the most striking and memorable feature of his work. After coming in contact with Ezra Pound, he learnt the value of concrete, clear and precise images. The result is that his work, says T.S. Pearce, “is full of images of great clarity” visual clarity that is, or even more precisely, mentally visual clarity” which strike the mind’s eye, which sees the object, or the scene described more roundly than the eye alone, and also perceived the emotions and associations connected with it. Eliot realizes that the accurate images, the fidelity of which may still be recognized, are the most telling, because such images are the “objective correlatives” for his thoughts and emotions. In other words, his images are evocative because they are concrete

and precise and because they convey his “intellectual and emotional complex”. He himself once remarked that his images are “consciously concrete”, they render as closely as possible something he has actually seen and remembered.

Each poem of T.S. Eliot may be called a series of pictures. His method is that of modern painters and filmmakers. He combines a series of pictures, which enter into a complex and organic relationship through contrast and parallelism.

SOURCES OF ELIOT’S IMAGERY

Eliot’s images are drawn from various aspects of life, and they can be categorized as-

- (1) Months and seasons of the year
- (2) Flowers and gardens especially garden of rose.
- (3) Water, lake and sea
- (4) Images derived from ancient myth both Christian and non-Christian
- (5) Images based upon ancient literature and philosophy
- (6) Parts of human body
- (7) City, streets, smoke and fog
- (8) Images of sex activities,
- (9) Images of fire and thunder
- (10) Images of stairs.

Most of the images and effect of all those sources is evident in his poetry, especially in *The Waste Land*. His images are always functional and not decorative. Their goal is to express a concept or feeling rather than to simply embellish the language.

PICTURE IMAGES

A distinctive feature of Eliot’s imagery is his use of picture images. Picture- images of people and objects caught in action. *The Waste Land* is full of such pictures. The poet has used the technique of the cinematography. In *The Waste Land*, there are a number of pictures. Each taken individually does not illustrate much, but when the poem is read as a whole, the picture combines in the whole memory, if not in one reading, certainly revealed. There are picture images of people or objects at a particular moment of time or action such are the images as Madame Sosostris, the fortune-teller, there is Mr. B. Eugenides, the fun-loving

merchant and typist girl. The images of such person bring with their host of associations and supply a setting where these persons can function.

IRONIC- SATIRIC IMAGES

Eliot's use of ironic - satiric images is another distinguish feature of his poetry. The first half of the images is noble and grand, but the second half is prosaic and trivial, and this contrast creates an ironic effect. For example, "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons", the beginning is grandiose, but the prosaic end creates an ironic effect.

The ironic contrast between the past and the present in the following lines from The Waste Land is worth nothing.

"O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
And on her daughter.
The wash their feet in soda water". (L-199-201)

Another example-

"When lovely woman stoops to folly,
.....
And puts a record on the gramophone". (L-253-256)

ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

Eliot makes liberal uses of imagery, which are intended to shock and startle the reader. For example, the following line from Rhapsody on a Windy Night, "There is the image of a prostitute standing against the open door. It is startling to find an open door being likened to a "grin" and the image carries with it the suggestion of it, the suggestion that the "grin" might develop into a "diabolic laughter".

"Regard the woman
Who hesitates towards you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin".

Thus, we see that the image is vivid. It is unusual and startling and conveys the nightmarish mood of the scene. Equally suggestive and startling are the following lines from The Waste Land: -

One of the low on whom assurance sits
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire. (L-233-234)

In the following lines, Eliot captures the very rhythm of modern life:-

..... the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting. (L-215-216)

COMPRESSION: LITERARY IMAGES

His images are sometimes compressed so lightly, that it requires several readings for the mind to visualize them clearly. In *The Waste Land*, such literary images have been profusely used, and from, this arises much of the difficulty and complexity of the poem, as well as its richness.

METAPHYSICAL CONCEITS: SYMBOLIC IMAGES

Sometimes, Eliot's images are overelaborated in the manner of the Metaphysical conceits. The best example of such a conceit is the image in the 'Love Song of Prufrock's in which fog is compared to a cat. Another type of image, which Eliot frequently uses, is the symbolic image, i.e., the image that suggests meaning more than that is actually described or asserted. The use of much symbolic image is a characteristic feature of his art. For example,

“When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon the table.”

(The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock)

The image is symbolic of Prufrock's state of mind. He is “conscious but conscious of nothing”, like a patient under ether. *The Waste Land* is a plethora of such symbolic imagery. Eliot's visuals are quite realistic and precise, yet they also suggest an emotional or intellectual complexity. Their linkages and implications are abundant.

Conrad Aiken describes *The Waste Land* as a series of sharp, discreet, slightly related perceptions and feelings, dramatically and lyrically presented and violently juxtaposed. He further says that we are thus invited into a world, which is broken bundle of mirror, a heap of broken image. The poet here very skillfully presents images with the help of separate picture of images, dimly related to one another.³

In one of his critical essays, Eliot justifies the writing of a poem consisting of a series of images, linked together by the imagination, but with explanatory and connection matter left out. “The justification of such abbreviation of method is that the sequences of images consider and concentrate into one intense impression”.⁴ The reader has to allow the image to fall into his memory successively, without questioning the reasonableness of each at this moment, so that at the end a total effect is produced. The use of image is primary with Eliot. Nevertheless, he claims in every case an arrangement of imagery according to the logic of the imagination. This method is exemplified in *The Waste Land*. It is a long poem on a single

theme – a state of spiritual barrenness. Objective correlatives are found in various images, situations, reflection, dramatic dialogues, and quotations from various languages. Philip Wheelwright points out that the barrenness of man's contemporary spiritual states assumes in Eliot's poetry in many imagistic forms-sand and dry rocks, gas, houses, ugliness, sandwich paper, litter, parvenu vulgarity, prostitution, hysteria, betrayal of death brings half death.⁵

The title of poem itself brings an image before our eyes, of a desert, a land and fertile becoming barren. This image keeps recurring throughout the poem. In the very second line, we have reference to the dead land. A little later, it becomes stony rubbish. The image is further elaborated of dead trees under the burning sun and dry stones ores, which no water trickles. Towards the end, when the betrayal and trial of Jesus are referred to mention is made of the agony in story places. Then, the track up the barren mountain is described. There is no water but only a disturbance of silence along the path of mud-cracked houses. To add to the misery of the travelers, the hermit, thrush deludes them into thinking that is sound of water by its water dripping song.

Near the chapel perilous to which the track leads, there are empty cisterns and exhausted wells. The song of the dry grass is heard. In the cemetery nearby can be found dry bones. The dryness, the barrenness and the lack of water stand for a spiritual state which prefers torpor to effort and which dislikes feeling and faith. Eliot suggests that this frustrated state may be the result of preference for safe neutrality and selfish isolation. The men and the women crossing the London Bridge to take up the monotony of their daily work are compared to the souls in Dante's 'Lamb', representing those who had led a life without incurring praise or blame.

“I see crowds of people walking in a ring.” (L-56)

They have been described as moral isolationists who could not make a choice, dammed followers of a wavering banner.

“unreal city,
Under the brown fog of a winter down.
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many”.

(L-206-210)

The reference to death and decay in the poem are somewhat ambivalent. Stetson is asked whether the corpse he planted last year in the garden has begun to sprout and whether it will bloom this year. The buried corpse seems to be capable of giving rise to new life like a buried seed provided. It is left undisturbed in its bed something similar to the grave in the rat's alley where dead men lose bones.

“I think we are in rat's alley

Where the dead men lose their bones” (L-115-116)

Bones are mentioned as having been cast also into a little low dry garret rattled by the rat's feet only. However, Ariel's song in *The Tempest* about the transformation, rich and strange brought about death is used more than once to suggest a direct approach to death. Madame Sosotris picks up the card of the drowned Phoenician sailor. The protagonist seems to remark that after his death his eyes becomes pearls, at the Chapel Perilous, a cock crows from the roof as lightning flashes, thunder rolls and a dame wing blows. These are hints that death may be preliminary to a new life and that the drought is not final.

Water is desperately needed in *The Waste Land*. However, it seems to be more feared than desired. April bringing with it the spring rain is for that reason called the cruelest month. The quotation from Wager in the first section makes the sea a symbol of desolation.

One of Eliot's common devices is the juxtaposition of scenes from various sources the meaning of which cross and re-cross. The picture may be apparently not linked but they enter into a new union in which even the quotation assumes a new meaning and a new life different from which they are taken in these lines.

“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;

They called me the hyacinth girl

-Yet when we come back, later from the hyacinth Garden,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

Speak and my eyes failed, I was neither living

Nor dead and I knew nothing,

Looking into the heart of light, the silence.” (L-35-41)

The passage assumes a more complex significance, when we turn to the quotation from Wagner's opera, which forms a sort of frame to the episode. The song from Act One of

“Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde” “Fair blows the wind” etc. is sung within the opera by a young sailor aboard the ship which is bringing Isolde to Cornwall. The song is simply one among happy and naive love. It brings to the mind of the protagonist an experience of lover similar to that of hyacinth girl. The last quotation “Empty and wide sea” forms an ironic contrast to this kind of love. It is the reply of the weather that informs the wounded Tristan that Isolde ship was nowhere in sight, the sea is empty. The two passengers, then, get a new meaning in the context. In the first, the love is happy, whereas in the second the love is absent, the sea is wide and empty. The last quotation suggests that even love can not exist in The Waste Land. Thus, the significance of the past age becomes more complex and more intense.

The fortune teller warns the protagonist that he should fear death by water, Ophelia’s farewell given at the end of the second section is described as inviting both sanctity and pollution, presently there is the picture of a dull canal behind the gas house which prompts thoughts about shipwreck death the corpses on a damp ground. On the banks of river, one can hear raucous gramophone records as well as music like that of the Ariel in The Tempest. A contrast is instituted between the Thames as it was in Elizabethan times and as it is today.

However, in the last section, the fear of water seems to overcome and the need for it is actually felt. The journey to chapel perilous seems to undertake with a view to bring rains to the land. The damp gust at the chapel welcomes the harbinger of rain.

Wheelwright has drawn attention to the two main tokens of spiritual failure in the poem, namely neutrality and separation. This is shown not merely through the crowd flouring over London Bridge. The modern Cleopatra and her lover do not have strong feelings towards each other; in this sense, they are neutral. Lil and her husband in the same section are equally isolated.

An Image of forthcoming death is implied in the following lines.

“Good night, Ladies, sweet ladies, good night, good night, good night.”(L-172)

These lines also suggest the mental disintegration and collapse that they are on the brink of madness. This line also reminds one of poor Ophelia’s last farewells. The suggestion is thus thrown out that not only is Lil old and ill but perhaps she is on the verge of death.

“At the violet hour, when the eyes and back

Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits

Like a taxi throbbing waiting,” (L-214-216)

“I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,

Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see.”(L-228-229)

“At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives

Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,” (L-221)

In these lines, he pictures mechanical sex relationship. The typist girl is compared to the throbbing taxi whose machine is on but is waiting for a customer to get in. Evening time is expressed as the violet hour. The last line has the reference to Stevenson’s play entitled Requiem. This line is in the prose order as to bring ‘the sailor, home from sea’.

The violation of the Thames daughters and the pictures of modern Thames signify the pollution caused by loveless sex on summer night. Seductions are quite common in modern life, and so much so that even the seduced seems to think it quite a normal occurrences.

The whole sense of spiritual aridity is well imagined in the picture of the crowds flowing over London Bridge, a picture of death in –life and later on the picture of disintegration and decay of Eastern Europe.

“Falling towers
Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria
Vienna, London
Unreal” (L-373-375)

It suggests the disintegration of modern civilization. These cities are falling because they have no spiritualism left in them. Finally, the message of the thunder reinforces the lesson. We give nothing, we show no compassion, and we exercise no self-control. This is brought out when it is hinted that even the awful daring of a moments surrender that has helped us to exist in only the first step towards a full spiritual life.

“We think of the key, each in his prison.

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.” (L-412-413)

The lines that recall the key turning on the lock of the cell in which Ugolino is described by Dante as being left to starve to death are a graphic picture of spiritual isolation. This is reinforced by Eliot’s note from **Bradley** putting forward the view that the perceptions and feelings of everyone constitute a distinct private universe. The same impression is

strengthened by a reference to Coriolanus standing all alone, his self-sufficiency threatened by appeals to his compassion and sense of kinship. When finally, the protagonist asks himself whether he ought not to set his lands in order, he feels separate and insulted from the rest of the people, he cannot work for their regeneration and the poem ends on the ambiguous note of the mad Hieronymo. The protagonist feels that he has diagnosed the spiritual illness of the modern world.

The poem ends with an impressive message from the Upanishads. The moral commands given there are meant to be of relevance to contemporary Christianity. At the same time, it should be noticed that the thunder is carefully linked to Christianity. First, mention of thunder is made when it is heard at the time of crucifixion. The pilgrims to the chapel hear sterile thunder on their way but, when the chapel is reached, a cock crows. It is seen in a flash of lightning is accompanying thunder is heard. When a damp wind blows suggesting that the crucifixion of Christ, the journey to the chapel perilous and message of thunder the Upanishads is intricately connected.

In *The Waste Land*, the poet primarily relies on images, linked together by the logic of imagination and centering on a fundamental theme, which can bear the burden of many approaches and varied perspectives. Eliot isn't a mere symbolist or imagist because his poems are quiet a mere string of disconnected images. They have unity and coherence in spite of indication to the contrary, like the imagist, he is always concrete, and his pictures are clearly realized and based on close and accurate observation. *The Waste Land* is not a formal structure poem in the traditional sense. There is little logical sequence. It is poem with a formal structure in the usual sense of the term. A poem invites us into a world of broken images. The modern aridity of spirit is well conveyed through images which bring to mind ancient references. Woven into the texture of the poem are the echoes of past which serves to emphasize the aridity of contemporary existence. The picture is not, however, totally unredeemed. There are some images of cheers too. The flash of those are pearls that were his eyes or the fishermen relaxing to the music of a mandolin or the pure voices of children singing of the grail ritual – these give in closer of hope to an otherwise sordid picture.

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