Modern Literature and T. S. Eliot

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Abstract:

This essay will discuss modern literature and the role of Eliot in the modern period. It will also point out those who influenced the poet, such as the influence of the French writers. It is very crucial for the argument of this study to examine the role of T. S. Eliot in modern literature. This is because Eliot and modern literature are very much inter-related. Without delving deep into the literature of the twentieth century, which is quite relevant to the works of T. S. Eliot, this study cannot be done as the period of the twentieth century is the time that Eliot started writing his influential works. It is true that Eliot was one of the most eminent modern English writers but he was initially influenced by the French writers. Eliot’s poems were not fully grasped at the first glance. Perhaps this difficulty is because of the nature of the period partly, and because of the nature of the poet who is a product of the twentieth century; who states that many times he read poems but did not understand it easily.

Key Words: Role of T. S. Eliot as a poet, Modern Poetry & Influences on T.S. Eliot
Introduction

In general, modern literature and particularly modern poetry gradually moves towards more difficulty and more allusiveness (Perkins 5). Otherwise it might not be able to represent modern humanity's crisis. This difficulty is of two sides, firstly because of the special problems of the modern civilization which, simple poetry of the previous ages cannot address. Secondly, this difficulty emerges from the modern poetry, because readers who are accustomed to reading poetry as poetry, are very few (Guillory, 169). Modern poets have realized writing everything directly is not good for the modern age. That is why they instead, express everything indirectly; which means they leave their poetry for the modern readers to understand and interpret. Eliot's writings are full of allusions, which show that the poet was very familiar with the previous poets. His allusions also show that the poet is not content with the modernism; as modernism rejects the high moral values of culture and society. He alludes mostly to the metaphysical poetry.

In this regard Eliot was highly praised in an anonymous review, The Dial, of “The Waste Land”. Eliot is almost the only young American who is neither ignorant of nor terrified by the classics. Because Eliot knows them and understands their relation to the work which was before, and came after them (Anonymous review of “The Waste Land”Dial, fits well with Eliot's own views of tradition). T. S. Eliot wrote in “The Idea of a Literary Review”, which is like a manifesto, published in The New Criterion in 1926. He said, “I believe that the modern tendency is toward something, which wants a better name, we may call classicism. Modern people have a tendency of discernible even in art, to embrace a better and more obvious notion of reason; which will make poetry more difficult (Menand, 564). This is not something that the modern poets deny, but they even
tried to explain the factor behind the complexity of their poetry. For instance T. S. Eliot in an essay states:

“It appears more likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity. This variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility must produce various and complex results. The poet therefore must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect in order to force, to dislocate if necessary language into his meaning, (The Metaphysical Poets, 1921).

The difficulty of the modern world has obliged the modern writers to cope themselves with the modern period; by being more allusive and indirect in their writings. Louis Menand considers Eliot as a poet and critic by both his nature and his situation. Eliot became very famous especially when he depreciated in his critical essays. Because, Eliot owes an increasing amount of his voice as a poet, and his principles as a critic to, some works of writers such as James. Through James, Eliot, the engineer of modern poetry found golden and unique stones, and bricks to build his strong castle in the field of modernity similar to; Wordsworth, Emerson, Arnold and Pater who built their own. (Menand, 17). In so doing he has faced so much difficulty with several people who either did not have a chance to see what is inside Eliot’s castle of modern humanity, or they deliberately denied his significance in the modern period.

Eliot like Baudelaire sees poetry, not only with an aesthetic purpose which raises problem of religion but poetry. Eliot thinks so due to the quality of his poems, which give both knowledge and sense of pleasure. Moreover, T. S. Eliot stresses the impersonality of poetry by saying that, poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. Herbert Howarth, states that Eliot demonstrated that a poet's business is not just reporting feeling,
but extending feeling, and creating a shape to convey it (Herbert: 108). Eliot believes that poetry must be objective rather than subjective. He even considers subjectivity as bad, because too much originality means too much subjectivity. It also implies that the writer neglects the outside while it is a key for this circumstance. In this sense Eliot always praises Pound’s works as the right, and original ones, (Nicholls, 55).

Eliot’s aim in writing poetry is similar to Dante’s; which is to save the living people from the melancholic condition. They also aim to move them into a happy circumstance in an indirect way; as the metaphysical poets also did. Eliot’s main goal is to save the universe from suicide (Cattaui, 116-117 & 121). Eliot seeks for the perfection of modern humanity in a better society; like Babbitt. Eliot sees both reason and discipline, as necessary for a better community. Like Royce, Eliot stresses the pivotal function of the society (Maddrey, 139).

What was a solution for the issues of culture last year may be a problem for the culture this year. This is probably one reason behind the difference in addressing the modern problems of humanity, by Eliot as compared to the nineteenth century poets. Rousseau defines humanity not as a part of the natural world, but in terms of the history of its own development. A development which, as Hegel showed was the development of inwardness. This success in inwardness is continuously making it difficult, and confirming that the encounter of mind with the real was neither the right place of art nor of poetry. This, in Hegel’s opinion was considered the best form of art as it was the best one which can objectify inwardness (Ayers, 16).

The poetry of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound includes the ideas of the religious informed modernist works, but they are not analogous (Historical Dictionary of the 1940s: 127). Fundamentalist Christians wanted to defend the literal interpretation of the Bible. On the contrary, they confronted the attack of science, social science and humiliating
episodes such as the Scopes monkey trial. Several groups strove to protect the fundamentalist point of view (Historical Dictionary of the 1940s: 127). Bryan Bible League and the Bible Crusaders, could not keep the unity between the modernists and conservatives, or separatists, which emerged by 1940. When the anti-modernists (separatists) no longer had control of church board, and colleges, they were separated and founded new institutions; in line with their religious faith. The separatists believed that acceptance of any aspects of modernism, was heresy or anti-Christian (Historical Dictionary of the 1940s: 127). There are some sources to prove these separations such as "little magazine of the time" and those works were published by some writers that are now known in literary circles as modernist.

T. S. Eliot, in his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” asserts that the influence of the previous literary figures on the next generation writers has an increasing significance. This influence sometimes fosters the horizon of thinking of certain poets, novelists, dramatists, short story writers and prose writers. Moreover, Eliot maintains that all the appreciations and achievements of the artists and poets belong to the dead poets and artist of the previous ages. For Eliot, the principle of aesthetic is that the new writers must be set for comparison and contrast among the dead; as one cannot evaluate the works of the new writers alone. Taking the old and the new works into consideration will form a sort of conformity between the two and readers will comprehend them completely (Antrim, 4). Antrim states that although Eliot strove to modify the view that, one needs to read the entire works of a writer to grasp his views thoroughly, it remained infamous. According to Antrim’s consideration the strong connection found amongst the influences on Eliot, Eliot’s works and Eliot’s life is seen in Eliot’s works. Antrim also believes that Eliot’s works can be considered as a spiritual journey (Antrim, 4).
Perhaps what is more accurate in seeking for the influences on Eliot’s thoughts, is the view of Craig Rainez about the influence of Julien Benda, Charles Murras and Pierce Lasserre, (three French philosophers). Their views made Eliot regard reason more important than emotion in his poetry (Raine, 47).

Eliot's reference to J. L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, as a source for his poem, "The Waste Land", made Weston's book, which is mainly about King Arthur, an English King and The Legend of Sir Gawain (1897), very famous, (Matthews, 135). Eliot claims that he was not influenced by either English nor by any American writers in his career as a poet. He instead asserts he was influenced by the nineteenth century French writers; Antrim also states, is noticeable in Eliot’s works, especially in his poems and Eliot does not deny it. For instance, when Eliot read Symon’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, in 1908, it provided him an introduction to a new feeling and revelation (Antrim, 7). Eliot about the influence of Symon’s book says Symon’s book is one of those which have affected the course of his life (The Letters of T. S. Eliot, 2011: 275). Furthermore Cattaui observes that Frazer’s works, Mead’s work as well as Jessie L. Weston’s work affected Eliot extensively (Cattaui, 47).

According to The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines Evidently, French Symbolists paved the way for a new poetry for Eliot as Rain also confirms it (686). Symons’ book included several Symbolists from them: Laforgue, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarme, Maeterlinck and Corbière. Eliot found Laforgue most capable of arousing interest (Antrim, 7).

Antrim believes that the method Laforgue uses is a normal progress, from the idea that all human beings have, by means of which figure forth the world (1971:7), is just speech and “when that leads to a feeling that the world is our human being’s saying it”,
after that the outcome is perhaps to be a self-awareness extremely. In poetry, any awareness of self is probable to cause a higher sense of irony (Antrim, 7).

After Laforgue's effect on Eliot, Eliot's interest in philosophy emerged which lead him to pursue F. H. Bradley's Philosophy. Eliot believed that it might give birth to a new type of poetry. Antrim believes that Eliot's interest in philosophy was to find a new way of writing with the blending of the notion of Laforgue's poetics and the style of Bradley's philosophy, which carry some identifying features. It was their stylistic characteristics that lead to the emergence of the character of Prufrock (1971: 8).

Eliot's style of thought is significantly influenced by the Philosophy of Bradley, (Antrim, 9). It should be remembered that Eliot's introduction to Bradley comes via Royce, as Eliot says that Royce is not a normal philosopher. Royce who is an idealist came after Kant, and he believed the entire universe is to be contained within an all-comprehensive mind. He also thought that the Logos or the absolute can be differentiated inside that mind of individuals, human, organic, and in "inanimate". It was a significant philosophy which is voluntristic, emphasizing the capability of a human being to come up with his redemption by an act of the will. Followed inside the gratitude endured by the society that is why Royce focused on the importance of fidelity and on the fundamental significance to be discovered in each of order and security (Antrim, 9).

Bradley was the philosopher who made Eliot spend much of his time focusing on his writings such as, his Ethical Studies, (1876), The Principles of Logic (1885) and Appearance and Reality (1883). Antrim proposes, Under Royce's guidance (1971: 9). The impact of a great number of Bradley's works was negative, and it was mostly about the British Empiricists. The main reason behind Bradley's objection of the British Empiricists was their explanation of the theme that; philosophy is the study of human knowledge or
thought. Bradley regards what British Empiricists regarded as idea, merely as appearance (Antrim, 9).

Perhaps Bradley's universal style was the factor that draws the attention of Eliot to him; there is no doubt that such a fascination is a significant section of his inspiration of the man's style. Eliot in his essay on Bradley (1927) has declared that one of the reasons that he still possesses power and his being salient, is due to his excellent gift of style.

Eliot is highly influenced by Bradley to the point that he compares Bradley to Arnold. Because he thinks the two share many similar characteristics. Eliot says that “Bradley is like Aristotle and can be known by his scrupulous respect for words… The tendency of his labors is to bring British philosophy closer to the Greek tradition “(Antrim, 11).

Eliot had a strong tendency to make his poetry universal, in so doing, he resorted to the past and such as, French Symbolists and some famous philosophers like Bradley. Bradley's influence upon Eliot made his poetry complicated like philosophy; as it was Eliot's wish to make his poetry meaningful and complex. The pessimism which is seen in Eliot's poetry is brought from the French poet, Symons. Olney states that Eliot was deeply influenced by Yeats’s notion of what being a poet is, and the type of the poetry; he presented in his life and his poetry. There are other poets who are more important to Eliot than Yeats for instance Dante (Olney, 4). Cattaui, in his book asserts that the role of Pound on Eliot’s several poems is clear. For example Pound in 1917 suggested Prufrock and Other Observations as a title for Eliot’s work. Pound also encouraged Eliot to stay in England. He also advised Pound who cut some sections of “The Waste Land” (Cattaui, 13-14). Eliot was a very successful American writer, hence led to Pound helping him. Eliot’s role was unique for pound; this made Pound say “the best poem I have yet had or
seen from an American. **Pray God it be not a single and unique success.**” … Then Pound says, “the only American I know of who has made an adequate preparation for writing. He has actually trained himself **and** modernized himself **on his own.**” Pound sent “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to Miss Monroe in October, 1914. It had the words, “The most interesting contribution I’ve had from an American. P.S. Hope you’ll get it in soon.” (Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 40).

It cannot be denied that Pound’s influence on Eliot is great, and the features of Eliot’s poems attracted the attention of Pound (Tracy 188). Hence, made Pound write letters to the magazine editors, urging them to publish Eliot’s works. An excellent example is “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Eliot’s power as a prominent and famous poet and critic of the modern poetry is clarified through his poems; which shows Eliot’s personality and his wish to find a solution the problem that people face. There are various ways for participating in rescuing the community. Such ways can be for instance, through one’s actions or writings or the weakest form, is through one’s heart. Eliot participated in this through his writings, which is the strongest way of reforming the society.

Eliot has not just parroted the native and the foreign literary people as some critics believe, but he is like the engineer of modern humanity. This is because Eliot has started collecting every unique and precious bricks from the past and the present, to rebuild the ruined community of modern humanity. T. S. Eliot is a good poet because he does not simply imitate, steal, deface but instead he makes what he has taken from the other literary men, into something; if not better not worse. Eliot’s allusions and references are based on what Eliot believes: as illustrated in his quote below.
“Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn. The bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest. Chapman borrowed from Seneca, Shakespeare and Webster from Montaigne. (T.S. Eliot, 206)

What Eliot has said about borrowing is a criterion against which poets must be judged upon. This is because there might not be something else that one wants to add to the above speech by Eliot. There is no doubt that what Eliot has made in the modern poetry, one might be able to name; that creation and invention as out of what he has taken, Eliot created something unique. Furthermore, Eliot has written certain criteria to judge upon the values of literary works, which help critics to judge on the merits and demerits of those works in a right way. It is obvious that many poets, novelists and dramatists borrowed from the previous writers or even from their contemporary which is not a problem. What is a problem is if a writer borrows some ideas from a writer or some writers, but he cannot produce something better than the ideas. In the case of Eliot, it might be said that he is creative, and therefore, he should not be blamed for his references, especially when he writes notes and explanations on his works to simplify it for the readers. If those people who Eliot borrowed from were in life now, they might thank him for reviving their works as there are thousands of important works, but they have been neglected nowadays. Eliot is not like some poets who participate in the modern movement due to other people’s joining in, or due to its novelty, but as something new he would be obliged to join.
There are some modern writers that Eliot was interested in their works such as Joseph Conrad. Eliot was particularly interested in Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* because of the importance of the novel Eliot alluded to it in one of his poems, “The Hollow Men”. Eliot wrote his poem “It means that Eliot did not blindly follow the writings of the writers of the previous ages. Eliot did not hate the works of the modern writers, for their being modern, but it was rather the excellent quality of the work that Eliot was seeking for in different ages.

Eliot always considered the importance of the past as an integral part of the present, (modern). To appreciate the value of the Past is to resort to the works of the masters of literature in general and poetry; particularly as they recorded what happened in the past like historians but in verse. In this regard, Homer and Dante were two of those that Eliot never neglected their contribution into literature (Cuddy, 21). This may require from poets a kind of experience, for instance, Eliot trained himself in classics which enable him mix the old with modern to produce something new by implementing certain techniques from them. The implementations include images, symbols and allusion, which are of the best features of modern poetry. Eliot believed that the poet must create a unique language of symbols to convey his thought, in a more allusive and indirect way; because the direct statement or description cannot represent real life of modern humanity. Through the use of images, symbols and allusion, Eliot could write his poetry in a better way but that made his poetry understood with difficulty. Even readers believe that his poetry is full of philosophy. It was the only way that through which Eliot could convey the essence of the modern world rather than escaping from it (Thorne, 280).

Eliot’s poetic critique of modern humanity is due to modern human’s depreciation of religion. Eliot Charles William, states in his book, *The Durable Satisfaction of Life*, that modern human in the twentieth century has rarely appreciation for religious beliefs,
especially for Christianity. Charles William thinks that modern humans have created a new religion out of the actual experience of men and women and the modern society as a whole unknowingly (Eliot, 71). Most often those who reject religion have a particular belief that they think could help them in their life. The ideas the secular people have, were influenced by tendancy to be very much complex and philosophical. It seems that T. S. Eliot’s poetry which carries some philosophical features, is a kind of response to the different types of ideologies that modern human beings tend to follow in the twentieth century. Ellmann and O’Clair argue that James Joyce appreciated Eliot, because Eliot was able to shape the modern poetry. They also appreciated him because he could dismantle the idea of poetry for female, which was one of the distinctive features of modern poetry (1998: 479). Modern poetry and especially T. S. Eliot’s poetry discuss the problems that modern humanity face in terms of theology, psychology, and loss of faith in God. How can one perceive those problems that modern humans face in the twentieth century? Deutch and Flam have responded this question; they believe that one cannot understand civilized people amply, until he has some knowledge of primitive man (2003: 122).

Modern humans are as described; as a person who searches in life continuously. In modern poetry, as kind of people who feel estranged and alienated in the society. In his search in life for his rights, modern humans are different from each other, but doubtlessly, some of them will be able to achieve what they are seeking. Others will not because of the social or fatal obstacles in front of them (Tiwari, 21). Some people in general are so delicate when they face any problem in their life; they easily become hopeless and disappointed. This is quite true especially when the social and religious relations are so weak among people. Modern technology has a negative influence in this regard on the lives of modern humanity, it seems that it made all people be busy with their materialistic life and forget about the spiritual aspect of life, which the food of the soul. Modern
human beings have dead souls but they do not care, or they do not know that they are immersed in the world where probably the value of things did not remain the same as it was in the past.

Davis and Jenkins in their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Poetry*, argue that one might be able to specify the period of modernist poetry. To them it is like an historical epoch. This period might end by the death of a critic Hugh Kenner in 2003 which was followed by a new period called contemporary (Davis and Jenkins, 1).

A piece of writing can be called modernist if it contains advanced technical features or in terms of the modernity of outlook of the producing poet or implied readership. This implies that the word modernist does not mean recent. Modernism movement is corresponding to modernity in community (Ayers, 11). Modernity is well defined in *The Dictionary of concepts in History*. It is specified that modernity is the end process of modernization (273).

Modernism is a movement which started around 1910; many things started changing in human life and literature, as literature is the reflection of human life. In the twentieth century modernist writers as Pound, Eliot, Moore, Loy, Stein, Crane, Brown, H.D., Williams, Hughes brought into their writings; (Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, The Waste Land, ‘An Octopus’, Anglo Mongrels and the Rose, Patriarchal Poetry, The Bridge, ‘Cabaret’, Trilogy, Paterson and Montage of a Dream), some recent techniques such as free verse, collage, juxtaposition, intertextuality, aesthetic innovation as well as linguistic abstraction. Modernism has lasted for a long time until the previous decade, but its influence is continuous on the postmodernism movement. It also led to the birth of modernism which caused postmodernism to come into being.
When the twentieth century started, it witnessed some changes in many aspects of modern humans’ lives. In this transition period some people felt alienated because they thought that they have lost some important things in the previous age, whereas some others will felt happy as they believed that they will achieve their goals in the future. That kind of feeling that modern human beings go through, is shaped by their personal understanding as well as his religious, psychological and social concerns about the events which took place, or which will happen in the future (Schmidt, 126).

Eliot’s thinking of the past literary works did not have a negative impact on him to lose the value of what was happening in his time; to enable him write his poetry using the old style, which the writers at that time used. He used the best styles of the past centuries and mixed with his own experience, hence benefited from the twentieth-century events and changes. His poetry is like a mirror to show the urban complex culture of his works to the readers. The post-industrial image of modern humanity is highlighted via the poetry of Eliot. So, if someone intends to understand modern humans, it is better for him to understand Eliot; as Eliot’s life and works is a direct insight into modernism and modern poetry (Sarker, 1). Role of Eliot’s poetry was mentioned by Sheila Sullivan in a book, entitled, *Critics on T. S. Eliot*, in which Sullivan states that Eliot’s influence for good or ill is beyond calculation. His influence is obviously appeared after “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” more particularly after “The Waste Land”, because Eliot did not write his poetry in the Georgian style, and it was new for his time (Sullivan, iii).

Eliot viewed the poet as a person whose task is to reorder the chaotic, irregular, fragmentary, experience of the modern world by transmuting thought into feelings and amalgamating disjointed experience. Thus, Eliot intended to make his poetry a succession of cinematic images; which represent the poet’s perception of the modern world. Eliot also focused on the necessity of finding different ways to express indirectly without
arousing like the Romantics, emotion and sensibility. He named this method that poets should pursue, objective correlative, which includes a set of objects, a situation and a chain of events, which can formulate that particular feeling. This implies that, the time the external facts, which must end the sensory experience, are presented, the emotion is suddenly evoked (Thorne, 282).

Eliot attempted to control the fragmentary, alienation, disillusionment and anarchism that modern humanity faced in the twentieth century, through his writings. He insisted that the issues of modern human beings, which were caused by anarchic individualism and scientific disciple, could only be addressed at a religious level of modern human’s spiritual existence. This is because the essential outlook can grow merely out of religion, which comprehends the entire aspects of life. Essential outlook can also counteract the futility and anarchy of the social life in the twentieth century. Accordingly, Eliot suggests that only in the kingdom of art and religion, the problematic issues of the modern world can be solved (Singh, 267).

Modernization in whatever else always involves a religious and modern problem. It has been viewed as a concept creating new values and meanings, and feared as threat to existing pattern of meanings and values. It relates to changes in all sectors of the society, including social relations, norms and personality. In either case personal and social values modernism is a modern retrospect and mostly co-relates to Christianity. Modernity involves processes of specialization and differentiation, which eventually leads to a modern world. To fully understand the concepts the old (past), should be put into consideration, otherwise it can be hard as the modern is not compared to anything. The three concepts can be said to interrelate but should be maintained as distinct analytically; since they vary and the sequence of their occurrence vary.
Bibliography


