

The Modernity of T.S.Eliot's The Waste Land from the Perspective of Image

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Abstract: T.S. Eliot is an excellent symbolist poet whose poems are regarded as epoch-making landmark works in the history of modern Western literature. The long lyric poem "The Waste Land" is Eliot's representative work. It has a variety of styles, draws from a wide variety of sources, and combines some characteristics of symbolism, imagism, and metaphysics. The poet has created many rich images of "Waste Land", most of which are difficult to understand and have complex and profound symbolic meanings. Thus, the poetry reflects the absurdity of reality, reflects on the plight of human civilization, and pursues the road to the redemption of the "Waste Land". This paper first reviews the existing research results on Eliot in the world, briefly describes the theoretical basis of the project, and classifies the image in The Waste Land. Then, the typical artistic techniques in the process of image use are analyzed in detail. After all these, by researching the typical images, the article not merely reveals their symbolic meaning but explores the reflection and criticism of modernity in poetry. Finally, the article traces the source of the modernity criticism presented by the images from social and religious perspectives. The research results are summarized and evaluated in the last section of the article.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land, image, modernity

1. Introduction

T.S. Eliot is an outstanding representative of the later symbolist poets. He wrote the Love Song of Prufrock, The Waste Land, Four Quartets, and other excellent poems, which opened up a generation of modernist poetry styles and ushered in the "Age of Eliot". At the same time, he is also an eminent literary theorist who has put forward a new literary criticism theory of "non-personalization", which starts from the work itself and carries on the internal study. In the history of literature, Eliot's most representative and landmark poem is "The Waste Land". With the help of many complex images, this long poem depicts a Waste Land that is full of spiritual confusion, declining ideals, and great material desires. His works' images of death, city, and time embody Eliot's understanding and criticism of modernity.

The image of poetry is the basic element of poetry and the soul and life of poetry. Poetic creation is the course in which the poet looks for objective things as images and constructs image language so that subjective emotions can be vividly expressed. In image shaping, Eliot inherited the image view of French symbolism. His use of imagery is characterized by metaphor and symbolism, and he realizes the integration of subjectivity and objectivity through the "logic of imagination". Compared

with the single image of French symbolism, Eliot's image shows the characteristics of polysemy and dialectics.

Modernity is an important part of Eliot's poetry, and his poetics also pays considerable attention to it. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a time of great change in the Western world. The exaltation of enlightenment rationality brings rationality, science, progress, and pragmatism. However, at the same time, the rapid rationalization, capitalization, industrialization, and urbanization of society bring all kinds of bad results and make the contradiction between instrumental rationality and value rationality more acute. In the face of this situation, Eliot reveals the loneliness, anxiety, and pessimism of people in modern western society in his poems, showing the empty, boring, and suffocating side of modern western society and reflecting on the crisis of modernity from the standpoint of criticizing instrumental rationality.

There are a lot of research achievements on T.S. Eliot's poetry in the world, which can be categorized into the following aspects: the study of Eliot's poetry, the study of poetry theory, the study of the version of his works, the study of religion, and the study of Eliot's studies. According to the discussion of Professor J. Brooke in the 1990s, the history of Eliot's criticism can be divided into three stages: the first stage is from the 1920s to the 1950s, the second stage is from the 1960s to the 1980s, and the third stage is from the 1980s to the present, which generally goes through the process of admiration, questioning, appreciation and understanding. In sum, the international academic circle has made fruitful achievements in analyzing the image and modernity of T.S. Eliot's poetry. However, most researchers focus on the image or modernity in isolation and rarely combine the two to analyze the modernity of Eliot's poetry from the image's perspective.

In response to the research gaps in this area, based on modernist poet T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, this article links theoretical analysis with textual analysis to study the representative images in *The Waste Land* and explore the significance of the modernity of poetry. In addition to the introduction and conclusion, this article is divided into four parts. In the introduction, the author will introduce the background, purpose, and significance of this research and the article's structure. The first part mainly focuses on the theoretical basis supporting the thesis. In part two, the article will study the construction of the image in *The Waste Land*, the characteristics of the image, and the image's aesthetic connotation. The third part discusses the modern meaning of the image in *The Waste Land* from three aspects. The fourth part expounds on the source of modernity in *The Waste Land*.

2. The Theoretical Basis of the Study

2.1. Image

In order to study the modernity of *The Waste Land* from the perspective of the image, we must first make the concept of literary image clear. Generally speaking, image is a broad concept that can be divided into four types: mental image, inner image, generalized image, and conceptual image [1]. In fact, the images in literary works discussed in this article are all conceptual images. Literary image is an important part of poetry. Without imagery, poetry would cease to exist.

In the history of world literature, many literary critics and writers have put forward their own definitions of image. China invented the aesthetic category of image. Its concept first appeared in Wang Chong's "On Heng" in the Han Dynasty of China, which was interpreted as an artistic image created by symbolic means. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant proposed the "Aesthetische idee" in his *Critique of Judgment*, which defines image as an image phenomenon produced by the imagination [2]. He believed that the function of the image is to trigger infinite and abstract thinking with limited and concrete images. According to Li Xiaoquan of China, poetic imagery is a

symbolic representation of the unity of subject and object, which is carefully constructed by poets to express certain aesthetic ideals or thoughts and feelings in the process of creation [3].

As for the image, TS Eliot also put forward his theory -- "objective counterpart" in *Hamlet and His Problem*, believing that "objective counterpart", which refers to the medium that the poet seeks to transform the emotion to be expressed, is the only way for artists to express their emotions [4]. It can be seen that image is undoubtedly in the "objective counterpart", bearing the role of expressing emotion. Thus, artists objectify emotions with the help of the structure of works, and literary critics can also make their own interpretations and evaluation based on the objectified objects. Through "objective counterpart", Eliot tries to overcome the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism and to diagnose and treat the ills of romantic, emotional indulgence. With the development of *The Times*, the concept of "objective counterpart" was widely popular because it catered to the non-personalized and anti-romantic tendencies of 20th-century literary criticism and was later regarded as an important concept of symbolism

2.2. Modernity

Modernity is neither a sociological concept, a political concept, nor exactly a historical concept. It is a characteristic mode of civilization, which opposes itself to tradition, that is to say, to all other anterior or traditional cultures [5]. At present, the concept of modernity is often associated with the emerging bourgeoisie. It is the product of the development of capitalist society, and its emergence can be traced back to Renaissance Europe. Since the Renaissance, the European economy and society have developed rapidly, and science has jumped to a new level. The rapid enrichment of research results in biology, physics, chemistry, and other natural sciences has changed the concept of human beings towards themselves, the world, and the universe. The occurrence of the first and second industrial revolutions promoted the rapid development of productivity in Europe. The arrival of the "Steam age" and the "electric age" greatly facilitated people's lives, and new technologies kept emerging. As a result, traditional values are losing their authority in every field. People are moving away from the past and into the modern age.

Parting with tradition, however, will not happen overnight. Breaks in the old order are unavoidable as it evolves. In the 18th century, the developed watch industry in Europe made time quantifiable, the emergence of various developed means of transportation shortened the space distance, and the rapid development of the media industry changed people's view of time and space. Together with the progress of productive forces, this change in ideas has caused the rupture between tradition and modernity, manifested in literature, art, science and technology, and daily life.

On the other hand, the crisis brought by modernity cannot be ignored; people's material and spiritual life has become extremely contradictory at both ends. The development of productive forces drives the progress of capitalism. Mass production dissimilates laborers into parts on the production line, strictly following the logic of capital and obeying the machinery law. The industrial production assembly line mode cuts people apart, losing the correlation and cooperation between each other, and people become indifferent and alienated [6]. In such a world, the human spirit and heart are imprisoned. The tradition of optimism and enterprising spirit since ancient Greece has been abandoned, and the Renaissance concept of human growth seems to be fading away, replaced by a long period of spiritual uncertainty and indifference. In such circumstances, Christian values are re-examined, and enlightenment modernity gradually loses its original vitality and leading power and cannot give rationality to people's life meaning. Faced with this situation, many writers criticized modernity. Eliot is one of them.

3. Construction of Image in The Waste Land

Compared with traditional poetry, T.S. Eliot constructs a series of "Waste Land" images in The Waste Land. It is a symbolic complex composed of numerous images with rich connotations and extensions, which is complicated to understand. With the help of the image, Eliot describes the confused situation and fragmented thinking of the "Waste Land man", which enhances the artistic expression of the poem and effectively expresses the poem's theme.

3.1. Image Shaping Classification

3.1.1. Death Image

Death image refers to the image in The Waste Land that is directly or indirectly related to the elements of destruction and death. Images of destruction and death abound in The Waste Land. Hordes of rats, dry earth, withered trees, and decaying cities. Together, these images depict modern people's degenerate mental state and life picture. The opening title of The Waste Land is "The Burial of the Dead", which sets the tone of grey and death. The verses are full of death-related images: white bodies, bones, and rats [7]. They present a death scene of disarray, decay, and desolation. In addition, some images are indirectly related to death but are grouped in verse to express the theme of destruction and death. For example, the broken tent, the last fingers of leaf, the brown earth, the departing nymphs and the Thames—these images are not directly related to death but construct a scene of decay. In addition to the examples given, there are many similar images of death to explore in the poem: The cry of gulls, the Unreal city, the brown fog, collapsing London Bridge. This is the modern Waste Land that Eliot paints for his readers. The nature of the Waste Land is death. It is the death of the traditional value system and the death of the traditional meaning. In such a period of comprehensive cultural transformation, modern people cannot find a place to live and are in a painful and anxious state of mental homelessness [8].

3.1.2. Resurrection Image

However, it is not pure destruction and death that Eliot describes in his poem. Under the soil, there are new seeds sprouting. In The Waste Land, apart from the numerous images of death, the images of resurrection are also worthy of attention, usually associated with religion. In The Burial of the Dead, although the poet defined April as "the cruellest month", lilacs still broke through from the dead land, and the hope of life never left [7]. Theologically, Easter is in April and is the anniversary of the resurrection of Jesus Christ after his crucifixion and burial in the garden. Therefore, the images of April and lilacs are no longer associated with death but rebirth. In this way, Eliot realized the connection between life and death.

In a word, the image of resurrection and the image of death are actually inseparable. Using the resurrection image, Eliot created the reincarnation between life and death, metaphorizing the way of redemption in the Waste Land.

3.2. The Artistic Technique of Image

The Waste Land is full of imagery, and its meaning is obscure and complex. In the process of constructing images, T.S. Eliot uses a variety of artistic techniques. Among them, the most noteworthy is the mythological structure of the poetic image and the paradoxical language in the process of image shaping.

3.2.1. The Mythological Structure

Many mythological and religious factors are behind the images in *The Waste Land*. In poetry, T.S. Eliot draws on various myths and historical allusions to create profound images. Most of the allusions in *The Waste Land* come from ancient Greek mythology, Shakespeare's plays, or the Bible, involving more than 50 works and more than 20 historical scholars [9]. It can be said that this long poem represents the "disillusionment of a generation" in a mythological structure.

The main image of the long poem is constructed by the myth of the Fisher King and the Holy Grail. *The Waste Land* begins with the loss of the Fisher king's ability to reproduce, and eventually, the mythical Grail is revealed, and the earth is revived. This suggests the poet's call to save the wilderness. This myth is the thread of *The Waste Land*, and the poem never deviates from it [10].

In addition to the clues, the poetic imagery is also full of myths and religious stories—a common source of allusions in the Bible. The images of roots, stones and "broken images" in *The Burial of the Dead* may seem like gibberish [7]. However, it is a parody of Ezekiel from the Old Testament.

Secondly, Western mythology is also an important source of poetic image in *The Waste Land: A Game of Chess*

In *The Game of Chess*, there are images such as Philomel, the barbarous king, and the nightingale, which all come from the mythological work *Metamorphosis* by the ancient Roman poet Ovid [7]. It refers to the story of the Philomel, who was raped and killed by "the barbarous king Tereus" and turned into a nightingale. In verse "and still she cried, and still the world pursues," the poet sees attitude: compared with the ancient, modern world did not show any progress, and people are still in a Waste Land.

3.2.2. Paradoxical Language

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot makes many mistakes in poetic language by utilizing image collages. This artistic technique realizes the defamiliarization of poetry language and makes the meaning of poetry more ambiguous and polysemy.

In the first chapter of *The Waste Land*, *The Burial of the Dead*, the poet does not list the images of death but presents the funeral of the living, for instance, the unreal city, the winter, the brown fog, and the crowd [7]. The title is "Burial for the dead"; nevertheless, the content is a funeral for the living. The line between life and death is blurred in the poem. Eliot seems to be using this series of contradictory images to expose the living state of modern people. The warm body is no longer filled with spiritual thoughts but the fallen, dead soul. The boundary between life and death is dissolved, and everything in the Waste Land becomes chaotic. What will become of the people who live on this land?

The paradox of language is not only reflected in the contradiction of images but also in the disorderly listing and collage of images. Eliot used many allusions in his poems to satirize the past and the present, and he was at ease with ancient and modern history and mythology. However, the poem's meaning becomes more obscure, and the reader can hardly distinguish the thread of the poem from a series of complex and chaotic images. Furthermore, the poet has no intention of paying too much attention to any myth or religious story. He collages images together, skimming them like a fly of water, to create a complicated and disorganized world of *Waste Land*. This way of writing may hint at the chaos of modern society, the inner dilemma of modern people, or perhaps its significance only lies in the reader's feeling when reading. After all, there is no need to inquire into the meaning of the poem; it is in the lines; poetry does not have to be explained; it has to be experienced. The experience is the meaning [11].

4. Modernity Significance of Image in The Waste Land

The Waste Land is regarded as a pioneer work of modernist literature because it no longer portrays typical characters in typical environments but uses modernist artistic techniques such as symbolism and fantasy, with rich Canon, obscure rhetoric, and complex imagery, which draws a clear line with the tradition of romanticism and realism. At the same time, The Waste Land also shows the criticism of modernity. Contrary to the rational tradition, it shows the alienation of humans and society brought by the war trauma and the development of industrial civilization and criticizes the suppression of instrumental rationality on value rationality.

4.1. Loss of Self

In modern western society, the progress of science and technology has brought about significant changes in the way of social labour and production, gradually forming a set of extremely rational and digital rule systems, in which the labourer has also become a simple number and the aspect of human nature has been ignored or even erased. The face of the individual becomes blurred, and the fully developed and free human nature is severely squeezed. In this case, people cannot maintain their subjective status and have to be alienated into production tools. "Man is not shown to be the true master of the Labour process either objectively or in his attitude towards it [12]." Through many images, The Waste Land vividly demonstrates this social phenomenon.

In poetry, "crowd" as an image, its face always seems blurred. They also seem to be acting on instinct and going with the flow. In the Burial of The Dead, " I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring", " A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many", " And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. / Flowed up the hill and down King William Street, / To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours/With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine"[7]. In the fast-moving modern society, individual people are ignored, merge into the mediocre group, lose the ability to think, have mental dependence, and keep repeating meaningless, mechanical actions.

Death on the Waste Land seemed careless and insignificant. The loss of life does not cause a single ripple in this barren landscape. The images of bones and corpses recur without causing fluctuations in the environment as if it were a trivial matter: "I think we are in rats' alley/Where the dead men lost their bones" "And bones cast in a little low dry garret, /Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year" [7]. Here, death is not respected, and life is also irrelevant. There is no life, and even survival is trivial. Instrumental rationality suppresses value rationality. In the system network and power network of modern industrial society, individual life is handed over to complicated, seemingly objective, and fair social institutions and regulations, while the individual life pay is silent and quiet [13].

Traditional beliefs are also dying out in a world of absurdity. "A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, /And the dead tree gives no shelter [7]." Using allusions from the Bible, Eliot depicts the broken "idol" and the dead "tree", showing the spiritual crisis caused by modern people's abandonment of faith. In modern western society, the change in production relations brings people's alienation. People living in the age of rationality are dominated by irrational forces. Therefore, the myth collapsed, and people gradually no longer had faith in their hearts and lost their spiritual homes.

4.2. Social Depravity

The imagery of The Waste Land also reflects the fall of modern society. The Waste Land is a very clear poem of the century, more specifically of the post-World War I period, chronicling the collapse of the Western value system. The concrete embodiment of this "collapse" is the land's desolation, unemotional sexual relations, lack of faith, cultural chaos, and spiritual exhaustion. In

this sense, Eliot reflects the anxieties of a turbulent post-Darwinian world [14]. The images of the sun, the dead tree, and the dry stone form a part of the desolate landscape [7]. This lifeless, dilapidated natural scene seems to suggest the degradation of the overall environment of modern society. Direct depictions of cities also exist in *The Waste Land*. In this process, in addition to the specific urban scenes of Britain, such as "the Thames", "King William Street", "London Bridge", and so on, "brown fog", "dusk", "bones", "gashouse" and other images often appear in the poem along with the description of the Waste Land city. Eliot built a city of London outside the real world in his poem, with its dark and grey background and choking smog. The bodies lie on the ground, and the factories are still running day and night. This is an exaggerated depiction of London in reality but also a spiritual scene of modern western society. "I sat upon the shore/Fishing, with the arid plain behind me/ Shall I at least set my lands in order? /London Bridge is falling down, falling down falling down [7]." At the end of the poem, London Bridge collapses. The traditional social order and value system broke down. The emptiness, ugliness, and depravity of modern society are gradually revealed. People are like the walking dead, running for their lives in the brown fog, chasing interests. However, they are imperceptibly heading for suffocation and death. This is the end that Eliot presupposes for the Waste Land society

5. Traceability of the Modernity of Imagery in *The Waste Land*

The production of works is bound to be deeply influenced by the society of the time to which the writer belongs. Any writer's creation cannot be separated from the history in which he is located, even if it is aestheticism that advertises "pure art". Therefore, the modernity of the image in Eliot's *The Waste Land* is characteristic of its times. At the same time, religious factors play an important role in the modernity of the image in *The Waste Land*.

5.1. Modern Society and Alienation

Eliot lived in a time when the second Industrial Revolution was in full swing. The progress of science and technology has greatly satisfied people's material needs. With the development of science and technology, the entertainment and cultural industry has also made rapid progress. When the material and spiritual levels are cheap comforts, people no longer try to make efforts and hard to pursue higher freedom, no longer do deep thinking, yet are only satisfied with low-level happiness and enjoy the present resources. As a result, the contradictions in economy, culture, class, and other aspects of society are covered up, and everyone is firmly controlled by technology, products, and social systems and cannot break free. This is where the reality of the Waste Land world comes from. Numb crowds, collapsed tombs, empty churches, rats, and skeletons. All kinds of bizarre scenes are a reflection of alienation in modern society. The image of "Waste Land" accurately and vividly presents western modern society with collapsing beliefs and broken values in the early 20th century. Seemingly absurd images are not the product of imagination but a synonym for social unrest, political chaos, civilization decline, and spiritual emptiness.

5.2. Religious Factors

Eliot, on the other hand, took religion seriously. He joined the Church of England in 1927 and became a devout Christian. *The Waste Land* is also full of religious images. For example, the chapter "What the Thunder Said" can be seen as Eliot's salvation for the Waste Land, in which religion is an essential element. Eliot first quoted the allusion to Jesus' suffering and atonement to the rising, suggesting that the soul can be saved. Those modern people with rotten souls can be redeemed by religion. In this chapter, Eliot also invokes the legend of Brahmanism in India. When Thunder said "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.", it meant "giving, compassion, and restraint" [7]. The

only way for the people of the Waste Land to escape death and be reborn is to do things in the way of "giving, compassion, and restraint," following the precepts of religion.

Eliot attached great importance to Christianity and believed that European culture could not survive the disappearance of the Christian faith. He concluded that increasingly secular liberalism and passivism were leading to social degradation. It is, therefore, necessary to restore the eternal source of truth so that the social organization will not perish by neglecting some fundamental aspect of reality [15]. These ideas are reflected in *The Waste Land*.

6. Conclusions

The outstanding symbolist poet T.S. Eliot created a series of "Waste Land" images in *The Waste Land*, which is full of disillusionment and despair. From the perspective of the image, this article digs deeply INTO THE modern characteristics of *The Waste Land* and analyses the poet's cognition and criticism of modernity.

The image of *The Waste Land* is complicated and obscure, which can be divided into death images and resurrection images. The image of death is associated with destruction and death, depicting the desolation and lethality of the Waste Land. The difference between the resurrection and death images is that although they seem to be related to death, readers can feel the hope of the resurrection of the Waste Land. The image of resurrection is often accompanied by the image of death, which forms the reincarnation between life and death and also blurs the boundary between life and death.

In the use of images, Eliot used many modernist artistic techniques. Among them, the worthiest attention is the mythical structure of the image and the paradoxical language. Myth and religion are important participants in the image shaping process of *The Waste Land*, forming the mythological structure of the image. In using images, Eliot often combines contradictory images to achieve the artistic effect of defamiliarization.

Based on the above contents, the article analyses the modernity of *The Waste Land* and traces its origin. The modernity of *The Waste Land* is mainly reflected in the following two points: loss of self and social depravity. The image of *The Waste Land* reflects people's attitude toward life in the real world, where they lose themselves and live drunken life. They become indistinguishable symbols, wasting their time as parts of the social machine. Like the collapse of London Bridge in the poem, the traditional order has collapsed in modern society. As a result, a crisis of faith occurs. People's spirits are lost in the Waste Land, insensible of where they come or where to go.

Eliot's criticism of modernity in *The Waste Land*, on the one hand, comes from his understanding of the society he lives in. Eliot lived in an age of technological explosion, war, and materialism. He deeply felt the absurdity of the "alienated world", so *The Waste Land* also contains his understanding of the society at that time. On the other hand, Eliot's religious thought has a great influence on modernity contained in *The Waste Land*. Religion was the salvation he found for the Waste Land.

The analysis of modernity in Eliot's *The Waste Land* from the perspective of the image is not only helpful to clarify the characteristics of the image in the poem but also conducive to a deep understanding of the poet's artistic techniques and aesthetic effects, to understand the criticism of modernity in *The Waste Land*. Eliot recognized the drawbacks of modernity, saw the loneliness, repression, and lack of human nature in the capitalist society, cared for the living state of human beings and tried to find a way out. *The Waste Land* arouses readers' reflections on themselves and society, reflecting on the gains and losses brought by modernity. From a historical point of view, Eliot and his *The Waste Land* greatly influenced world literature, especially on the emergence and development of many schools of modernism and postmodernism literature.

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