

An Analysis of the Application of Impersonal Theory in The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot Based on Objective Correlatives

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Abstract: In *The Waste Land*, Thomas Sterns Eliot turned his own emotions into “objective correlatives” that can be engaged and experienced with, making his subjective mental activities objective through objective existence and making it possible for the audience to enter the mental world of his. These objective correlatives lead different readers into a shared piece of memory, which is the universal traumatic memory of people from western countries after World War I. The common memories awaken a universal psychological feeling of decadence, numbness and desperation. Eliot had a significant influence on New Criticism and Impersonal Theory. As he put it, authors can express a universal truth through intense personal experience and maintain the uniqueness of its experience with the aim of making it a universal symbol. The formation of this universal symbol is the process of the mutual integration of subjectivity and objectivity. It's also the process of the rise of personal emotions to universal ones, which is the ultimate artistic effect in Eliot's impersonal and objective correlative theory. This paper will explain the application of impersonal theory in poetry, explain how the artistic emotions in poetry are impersonal and explain how the historical tradition works as a common background for poets by analyzing the objective correlatives in *The Waste Land*. It's through objective correlatives that the poet rationally expresses this artistic emotion.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot; *The Waste Land*; Impersonal Theory; Objective Correlative

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The Waste Land is a representative of Symbolism. This modern epic, which is intersected with time and allusion and draws on many classics, depicts the decadent, desperate and frustrated mental status of the western world after the First World War. People of modern civilization live like walking dead in the wasteland who are in need of salvation and rebirth. This poem is regarded as a milestone in modern poetry as it does not adopt the Romantic tradition of the 19th century or strong and subjective language but draws on a large amount of references concerning old classics as objective correlatives to express its thoughts and feelings. These long and convoluted references have created a close connection between personal experience and historical tradition and also endowed personal experience with a universal value. Based on Eliot's Objective Correlative Theory, this paper attempts to analyze the logical relationship and functional meaning of the important objective correlatives from the five chapters of *The Waste Land*, organize the hidden narrative clues of the story from seemingly disordered text, recreate the waste land in Eliot's mind by exploring the connection between the correlatives and the inner feelings of him, and figure out how Eliot maps the destiny of modern civilization with impersonal theory.

1.2 Research Question

Objective correlatives are a way of composing in Eliot's poetic theory. The correlatives are the objective projection of the poet's mind. A poet should refrain from communicating his thoughts and feelings directly to his readers and a medium between the poet and the audience is critical. This medium could be a proper object, a right situation, or a sequence of proper events, through which the audience could relate themselves with the author.

This paper demonstrates how Eliot successfully applied Impersonal Theory in *The Waste Land* by analyzing how Eliot links personal experience closely with historical tradition with massive allusion from works by predecessors. The third chapter analyzes how people in the wasteland suffer from emotional paralysis and frustration in sex and the Hyacinth, the Fisher King, Tiresias, and the Holy Grail are covered in this chapter. The fourth chapter analyzes how people in the wasteland failed to achieve rebirth and how people in modern civilization failed to retrieve faith. Spring, the Hanged Man, the Thames River, and Fire are covered in this chapter. The fifth chapter analyzes the dilemma of man faced with incoming devastation and Madame Sosostris and the Drowned Phoenician Sailor are covered in this chapter. The sixth chapter analyzes the solution to the crisis in the wasteland and how people there can have their salvation. The character covered in this chapter is the Man with Three Staves.

2. Literature Review

Symbolism is a late 19th century art movement of French, Russian and Belgian origin in poetry and other arts. In symbolism mystical or abstract ideas are generally expressed through different images. *The Waste Land* is regarded as one of the most influential representative of Symbolism and it's widely acknowledged that the message of this poem depends on symbols and allusions to a very large extent.

2.1 Foreign Literature

Helen Gardner in the Book "The Art of T.S Eliot" Says: "Although the *Waste Land* may begin with the dilemma of the modern mind, it discovers that the modern dilemma is the historic dilemma." (Gardner, 88)^[1] Despite particular attention to Four Quartets, Helen figured out how Eliot prepared himself in his poetic theory, that is, New criticism, by writing earlier works. Eliot's theoretical achievements prepared him for his application of Impersonal theory in *The Waste Land*.

Williamson Remarks: "The people of the *Waste Land* are not made happy by the return of spring, of fruitfulness to the soil: they prefer the barrenness of winter or the dead season." (Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis*, 125)

^[2] Williamson examines the structure and meaning of Eliot's major works, pointing out that the theoretical achievements from Eliot turned poetry on its head. Eliot's use of objective correlatives is a great starting point for readers to understand the narration and theme of Eliot's masterpieces.

2.2 Chinese Literature

Compared with foreign studies, domestic studies on T.S. Eliot started relatively late and lags behind yet stays on the rise for the past years. The domestic research achievements are mainly manifested in two aspects, which are monographs and doctoral and journal papers. So far there are two monographs on *The Waste Land*: "Eliot's *Waste Land*" (Ed. Chou Zhaoming et al., Taipei: Student English Magazine, 1976) and "The 'castle' on the wasteland: A Study on Western Modernist Literature" (Zhang Qinwen, Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Education Press, 2006). Besides, there are over 20 doctoral papers and over 130 journal papers.

Most researchers attempt to make a deeper exposition of the text from the author's own creative point of view, for example, "An Analysis of the Application of Eliot's Literary Theory in *The Waste Land*" by Wakudi. (Wakudi, 285-286, 288)^[3] Eliot's Historical Consciousness, Impersonal Theory, Objective Correlatives and a series of views have played a pioneering and leading role in the western modern literary criticism.

Other researches focus on the female characters in *The Waste Land* and the problems they reflect like "The Framework Structure of *The Waste Land*: An Interpretation of the Female Discourse in T.S. Eliot's Works" by Nie Liantao. (Nie, 28-32)^[4] Feminist criticism analyze the symbolic meaning and status of females in *The Waste Land* and interpret female discourse power.

Liu Lihui, in "The Transfiguration of the Fish King: Eliot in the *Waste Land*," expresses the body narration of the *Waste Land* not only reflects the original sin consciousness of New England Puritan thought, but also is the projection of Eliot couple's physical and marital conditions and a successful practice of Eliot's Impersonal Theory. (Liu, 51-58)^[5] He did a deeper interpretation of the role of religion and the failure of it from the perspective of both living conditions and the successful practice of Impersonal Theory.

Chen Shuyi, from Eliot's own life, marriage state and religious thought and based on the analysis of the living condition and social condition of people reflected in the poem, finds out the root cause of Eliot's composition of *The Wasteland* In her "Personal and Cultural Confusion: the Root Cause of Eliot's Creation of *The Wasteland*." (Chen, 97-108)^[6] Her research mostly focused on historical environment of the western world after World War I, despite this is in contrast with New criticism and Formalist criticism, which advocates art for art's sake and criticism focusing on text itself.

To sum up, the researches on Eliot covers a variety of schools of literary criticism, including Ecocriticism that excavates the deeper thoughts and contents of the spiritual wasteland, Feminist criticism that focuses on female discourse power and Formalist criticism

that achieves a deeper level of elaboration of the text from the perspective of composing itself. Yet these critiques share one thing in common: they generally focus on theme and writing characteristics. Therefore, we can clearly see that acknowledge that an intellectual account of writing techniques and poetic theory would be of great help for the audience to understand the theme of this poem. From the perspective of objective correlative, this paper analyzes in detail how Eliot's Impersonal Theory is applied in *The Waste Land* and reveals the wasteland in the mind of Eliot.

3. Death-resurrection Pattern

3.1 Analysis of the Image of Water: the Thames River

People in the wasteland are not only powerless against the impending destruction but also struggling in relationships with themselves, suffering from infernal pain in the fire of their own lust. In the third chapter *Fire Sermon*, Tiresias, who is on his journey to find the Holy Grail, comes to modern London city that is broken like a ruin and witnesses the void and desolated spiritual life of people in modern western countries. The struggle and the destruction in the enthralling flame of lust is exactly how modern westerners deal with themselves.

Water is the first important objective correlative mentioned in the third chapter. This chapter is titled with *Fire Sermon* but a lot of words are spent on water in this chapter. Water here has two meanings, the first of which is the Thames river that symbolizes overflowing lust and the second of which symbolizes tempest of punishing nature. Tiresias feels sad and frustrated about the Thames river he sees because this river has long since lost its glory. Now this river is filled with "Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends" that represent modern civilization and "The loitering heirs of city directors" and their fractured sex scenes with "The nymphs." "Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song" comes from Edmund Spenser's *Epithalamion* but here seems like a tribute to the poetics and elegance of the classics in Eliot's veneration of the past. The Thames River in modern London is now nothing more than a river of lust, bursting its banks and overflowed with sexual desire. This river connects "The loitering heirs of city directors" and "The nymphs," flows indistinctly in the sex scene of the typist and the young man carbuncular who have no love and finally converges into the song of the Daughter of the Rhine. The Daughter of the Rhine here is not a fairy like in Wagner's opera song but refers to all souls who can't help but indulge themselves in water of lust, singing "My people humble people who expect Nothing." These thoughtless and loveless people could do nothing but go adrift with the stream of instincts and lust. This scene of water of lust indicates the truth that the mind of people in the wasteland is so barren that they are not willing to be reborn but would only indulge themselves in overflowing lust and meaningless sex behaviors. People in the wasteland are in desperate need of water that symbolizes devastation for self-destruction so that they could be reborn^[7].

3.2 Analysis of the Image of Water: the Tempest

Soon Eliot introduced Prince Ferdinand from *The Tempest* by Shakespeare, "Musing upon the king my brother's wreck. And on the king my father's death before him," which indicates that the water of punishing nature, that is, the tempest is about to come despite the river still seems calm. The catastrophic power of the tempest will devastate everything and then bring new life to this land. It is not until the meaning of punishment and destruction of water is introduced in this chapter that the symbolic meaning of water is completely grafted to the modern western society. The protagonists of *The Tempest* fight for power at the expense of their brothers and their souls are twisted by greed. They flow in the water of desire, get flooded by the tempest, which is the water of punishing nature and finally die in the ocean of their own desires. The introduction of this allusion shed light upon the symbolic meaning of water.

Eliot chose an important correlative water in *Fire Sermon* and all the fragmentary scenes and events are nothing more than bubbles and waves in the water, reflecting the restlessness of the desire. It is through water that Eliot is able to connect different parts of the third chapter, suggesting the surging desires of people in the wasteland and the water of lust will finally lead to destruction. Finally at the end of the chapter, fire appears.

3.3 Analysis of the Image of Fire

Likewise, the objective correlative fire has two meanings. Fire and water are extremely similar to each other in each one two core meanings. The first meaning of fire is the fire of sexual desire that causes people in the wasteland to become obsessed with sex that fails to convey personal love and indulged in overflowing sexual desire and brings them to self-struggle. The second meaning corresponds to the section title *Fire Sermon*, the raging fire to purify all and brings destruction and rebirth to human beings. Eliot and his mentor, Ezra, who edited *The Waste Land*, were deeply influenced by culture of the Oriental world. *Fire Sermon* refers to the Buddhist interpretation of fire: Everything is burning on fire of sexual desire, hatred and eroticism, burning because of *Sidpa*, evening of life, death, depression, sadness, pain grudge and desperation. The meaning sexual desire is finally purified by the raging fire and

the destruction is also rebirth.

The Wasteland was once controversy for being fragmentary yet here we see there is some sort of coherent image system behind the seemingly fractured structure of this poem like water and fire in this chapter. It should be noted that most of Eliot's coherent and stable imagistic structures or objective correlatives are based on myths and legends or anthropology, thus steering the symbolic meaning to the existence of mankind itself or some other ultimate meaning. Perhaps this also explains why the images of modern society in the poem often appear in a broken and messy form: These images themselves have no real value or significance or any kind^[8]. They are just a collection of broken images not related to the answer to the fate of human beings.

4. The Solution to the Crisis

To what extent can it be argued that there is hope and salvation for the wasteland? Simply the adjective "Wasteland" stimulates ideas of desolation and depression itself. It reminds one of 'no man's land', an expansion of ground situated in-between German and British trenches during the First World War, which essentially was a place of fear and horror as moving within its proximity meant almost certain death. Eliot is not trying to convey a measure of such abhorrence, he's more trying to convey the idea that his "Wasteland" is inescapable. However, one could argue that with the help of self-belief and hope, any character finding itself lost within the Wasteland, could reach salvation. It is instances when characters find themselves trapped, and they begin to lose hope, that the prospect of salvation becomes distant to them. This chapter covers the Man with three Staves and analyzes the solution to the barrenness of spiritual world.

4.1 Analysis of the Three Commandments from Buddhism

Rebirth is the most possible ending to the wasteland. The very objective correlative that represents rebirth, namely the man with three staves is mentioned in the first chapter The Burial of the Dead and the last chapter What the Thunder Said takes directly the words of thunder given by the man with three staves as the hope for resurrection of the Wasteland. Thunder is regarded to authority by people and the three commandments given by this man "Datta: what have we given?" "Dayadhvam: I have heard the key" and "Damyata: The boat responded" mean the spirit of generosity, compassion and self-restraint in Sanskrit and are commandments from Buddhism and Hinduism. This indicates that Eliot, Pound and other European and American visionary people have realized that the western civilization cannot solve the predicament of the crisis of faith by itself and the enlightenment from the eastern civilization may be the key to solve the problem of Europe^[9]. The man with three staves refers to the Pope in tarot cards. The three sticks represent the three precepts given by the Buddha in the words of thunder while staves stand for genitals of male; therefore, this correlative also symbolizes harvest and reproduction and is the key to solving frustration in sexual love for people in the wasteland.

4.2 Analysis of the Bizarre Images of Modern Spiritual Life

In addition, there are many extremely abnormal and surreal images in the last chapter What the Thunder Said, including a woman who plays music with her hair as the string, bats with baby faces, towers upside-down in air tolling reminiscent bells, grass singing over tumbled graves, a cock crowing on the roof tree, a corpse that sprouts and blooms and an old man with female breasts which should be Tiresias himself^[10]. These grotesque images, which seemingly have no logical connection with each other, together with the grotesque structure of the poem, highlight a variety of bizarre behaviors of modern people and express an irrational emotion close to madness or a chaotic and up-side-down state of mental disorientation. But the theme of the last chapter is how people in the wasteland could save themselves and the author uncommonly and perhaps for the first time in the poem gets positive here. In the last part of the poem, the poet borrows from the teachings of Buddhism, suggesting that one can enter the realm of Nirvana only by practicing the three virtues of Buddhism. So these grotesque images should reflect the poet's positive attitude towards saving the wasteland, the idea of how the wasteland people should live and the optimism in the face of death. The tower overhang that still bells and grass that sings on a grave for the dead are beautiful images of life, implying there is life in death and as long as people in the wasteland keep being so positive there is hope for rebirth at the end of the day.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper analyzed the scene of wasteland in the mind of Eliot from the perspective of objective correlatives: whether with themselves or with the world, people of modern society are in an irreconcilable contradiction and are driven by naturalist competitions, numbness and desires. The whole world is caught up in irrationality and madness. It's from these two points of view that Eliot said the world we live in is nothing more than a vast wasteland. The whole human civilization in Eliot's mind is but a meaningless and worthless fragment, where "And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief And the dry stone no sound of water^[11]." People living in the wasteland have lost their faith and dreams, only living a life of

walking dead with primitive desires like Sibyllam in the prologue. Kids ask her what she wants “Σιβυλλατι θελεις” but she answers “αποθανειν θελω,” which is the common voice of people in the wasteland. Living is torture and death is the relief for Sibyllam, who has immortality but can’t stay young. After all, the three commandments given by the man with three staves in words of thunder are just a little hope in desperation. For those who have lost faith or given up hope, death is the only escape and salvation in the wasteland.

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