

**METAPHYSICAL ELEMENTS IN T. S. ELIOT'S
“PRELUDES”, “RHAPSODY ON A WINDY NIGHT” AND
“MR. APOLLINAX”**

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The term, “metaphysical” that is applied in this article is not directly concerned with the “metaphysics”, which is a branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of existence, truth and knowledge. The phrase, “metaphysical elements” in the title of the article refers to or concerns with the devices and characteristics in Eliot’s poetry that bear close or some resemblance to those of the metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century, spearheaded by John Donne.

The devices of the metaphysical poetry of the 17th century include obscurity, erudition, esotericism, concentration, unification of sensibility, witticism; use of conceits, metaphors and paradoxes, colloquialism etc. Traces of most of these metaphysical devices are unmistakably present in Eliot’s poetry. In this article, three of Eliot’s poems are analysed with the view to identify some of the metaphysical elements present in them.

The closely interconnected characteristics like obscurity, erudition and esotericism are easily perceptible in Eliot’s poetry. Obscurity is an important characteristic of Eliot’s poetry that brought him into close resemblance with Donne. Eliot was a man of wide reading and learning. He compressed vast and varied historical, religious and cultural materials in his poetry. Extra-textual reading is often necessary to understand his poetry. Some of his poems contain enormous amount of allusions, references, quotations from varied sources that make them difficult and obscure.

Esotericism is another characteristic of Eliot’s poetry. Like the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, Eliot deliberately deviated from the poetic trend of his age. He did not believe in a simple and naïve poetry that catered to the popular taste of the people. He, instead, strongly felt that poetry should have universal and lasting value and be capable of incorporating different aspects of human existence, no matter how sordid or complex.

Concentration is another important characteristic of Eliot’s poetry. Vast and varied materials are compressed and concentrated in his poems. As a result, they have the potential for tremendous expansion. The complexity and futility of human existence, not only of that of

modern urban life but of all ages, have been amalgamated in some of his highly concentrated poems.

Unification of sensibility is yet another very important metaphysical device that Eliot effectively employs in his poetry. Through this device, Eliot managed to amalgamate vast and seemingly unrelated materials and bring out coherence and harmony.

Similarity between Eliot and the metaphysical poets has also been observed in their witticism and keen sense of perception. Witticism is, indeed, one pervading characteristic of Eliot's poetry. In his subtle observations and expressions, wit is always present. His conceits, paradoxes and satires testify to his sharp wit and incisive sense of perception. In the employment of conceits, metaphors and paradoxes too, there are great similarities between Eliot and Donne. Both effectively employ these devices for some special purposes such as depicting a situation, presenting a line of argument or showing similarities between two seemingly contradictory objects or situations.

In the conversational tone and the vocabulary too, there are close resemblance between Eliot's poetry and that of the metaphysical poets. There are number of instances in Eliot's poetry where the tone and vocabulary are very similar with those that are used in everyday life by common people. Like the metaphysical poets, Eliot subtly mingles ordinary language with that of the strange and abstruse.

Preludes is the first poem to be analyzed in this article. This poem belongs to the collection of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). The poem has four parts that deal with the everyday life that is consisted of the evening, morning and night. The four parts of the poem are well unified. In this connection, Grover Smith made the following observation:

The "Preludes" are better unified than Eliot's method of composing them might seem to have permitted. Indeed, the first and second, written in close succession, not only complement each other but together lead into an epistemological concept entertained in the third and fourth; and all four agree in imagery. (21)

The poem is rich in imageries that powerfully depict the different atmospheres that prevail at different parts of the day. The first, second and third sections of the poem respectively portray the scenes of evening, morning and night of a city characterised by spiritual and moral degradation. Interestingly, the poem also contains few conceits that closely resemble those of the metaphysical poetry. The fourth line of the first section of the poem, "The burnt-out ends of smoky days", is a metaphysical conceit that contains a startling metaphor. The ends of days are here implicitly presented as butts of burnt-out cigarettes.

Again, in the third section of the poem, another metaphysical conceit occurs:

You tossed a blanket from the bed,
You lay upon your back, and waited;
You dozed and watched the night revealing
The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted;
They flickered against the ceiling.

The character is lying on the bed and is seeing a vision of the "thousand sordid images" that are flickering against the ceiling. The thousand images are that of the vices and evils of the

squalid city life. The idea of the soul being constituted of the “thousand sordid images” is far-fetched and is comparable to a metaphysical conceit.

The first line of the fourth section, “His soul stretched tight across the skies” is also a conceit. Here the soul of the street is compared to some material which could be a wire or a rope that can be stretched out to an incredible extent. This comparison is fantastic and far-fetched like a metaphysical conceit.

The comparison of the woman and the street too is very similar to a metaphysical conceit. In this connection, Grover Smith says:

Woman and the street alike are earthbound: she supine in bed, “he” trampled underfoot; and in their hypothetical aspirations upward, when her soul’s images flicker overhead and his soul is “stretched tight across the skies,” they but mirror the degraded nature of their conscious selves. (22)

Another conceit is found in the second passage of the fourth section, “I am moved by fancies that are curled/ Around these images, and cling:” Fancies are here presented as something that are capable of curling around something else, and the images are presented as some tangible objects that are capable of being curled around. The idea of fancies curling around images is, indeed, far-fetched and fantastic.

The poem concludes with yet another fantastic comparison, “The worlds revolve like ancient women/ Gathering fuel in vacant lots.” The comparison of the worlds to ancient women is also far-fetched. It is hard to find any similarity between them. The comparison, in fact, fulfills the description of a metaphysical conceit, which is said to be “a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike” (Abrams 30) On the metaphysicality of these two lines, A.D. Moody states:

As in the wit of some of Eliot’s masters, Donne and Webster and Marvell, things remote and unlike are ‘yoked together’- ‘The worlds revolve like ancient women’- in order to intensify some immediate emotion or perception. The effect depends upon there being no connection between the elements: it is the wit alone which hold them together. (56)

Rhapsody on a Windy Night is the next poem to be analyzed. It was published in 1917 as part of the collection of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations*. Eliot wrote it at Harvard in 1911 when he returned from Paris. The poem deals with the sordid life of Paris Street. It opens at midnight when the moonlight is dominating over the landscape and the atmosphere. The mind and the memory of the narrator too have been so powerfully affected by the moonlight that it cannot function properly. On the obscurity of the poem and the presence of unified sensibility in it, George Williamson made the following observation:

More complicated feeling is expressed in another poem of 1915, which employs imagery of a more esoteric order. This is the “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” a title in music suggests a composition of enthusiastic character but indefinite form. But if we take it as an effusion marked by extravagance of idea and expression, and without connected thought, we shall be coming short of the mark. The rhapsody has method enough; it concerns with a windy night on a street “held in a lunar synthesis” and the

speaker is returning to his lodgings. The lunar spell dissolves the usual order of the memory and provides a new principle of association; then time successively shakes the memory in an irrational but symbolic fashion, producing in each instance a synthesis which is both an emotion and a comment. (80)

Far-fetched comparisons occur in the first and second passages, which closely resemble metaphysical conceits:

Every street lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum,
And through the spaces of the dark
Midnight shakes the memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium.

The two comparisons here are unmistakably fantastic and far-fetched. The street lamp beating like a drum is quite unimaginable in real life. The street lamp can give light but it cannot beat like a drum. By associating these two patently different ideas, a conceit has been created. Again the comparisons of midnight to a madman and the memory to a dead geranium are far-fetched. They closely resemble the conceits employed in metaphysical poetry.

Again, in the following lines that occur in the second passage of the poem, there are two more fantastic comparisons:

The street-lamp said, 'Regard that woman
Who hesitates towards you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin.'

The comparisons of the opening of the door to a 'grin' and the twisting of the corner of the woman's eye to 'a crooked pin' are, indeed, fantastic and far-fetched.

There is an amalgamation of unpleasant sights, images and smells in the poem. In the second passage of the poem, there is the sight of a woman hesitating towards the light of the door, the border of whose dress is torn and stained suggesting some shady sexual encounter. This is followed by the images of "A twisted branch upon the beach/ Eaten smooth, and polished/" and "A broken spring in a factory yard." Other unpleasant sights in the poem are that of a cat that "devours a morsel of rancid butter", the hand of a child that "Slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running along the quay", "An old crab with barnacles on his back" and the moon whose face has been cracked by "a washed-out smallpox". There are also the smells of chestnuts in the streets, of female in shuttered rooms, of cigarettes in corridors and of cocktail in bars. On close observation, it becomes clear that there is a unified sensibility in the poem. The disparate sights, smells and images in the poem are amalgamated to produce a unified sensibility of the sordid condition of Paris Street.

Mr. Apollinax is the next poem that has been taken up for analysis. The poem is included in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). Like *Prufrock*, it bears a powerful influence of metaphysical poetry. The main character of the poem, Mr. Apollinax, is a man with contradictory

and paradoxical qualities. On the paradoxical personality of Mr. Apollinax, George Williamson remarks:

Thus Mr. Apollinax is presented as both shy and crude, intellectual and animal; and the combination baffles his host and hostess, to the amusement of the speaker, on this afternoon of a faun. (83-84)

Another striking metaphysical characteristic of the poem is its witticism, which is a clever mixing of serious and light elements. In this connection, Elizabeth Drew says:

One of the qualities for which Eliot has praised the Metaphysicals is the 'alliance of levity and seriousness' in their poetry. It is a quality which disappeared early from his own work, where his wit, concentrated intellectual brilliance, becomes steadily more serious and sardonic. But in this poem there is an agreeable mixture of grave and gay in his ironic scrutiny. (25-26)

The poem also contains interestingly interrelated metaphysical elements like conceit, wit and unified sensibility. The following lines demonstrate the metaphysicality of the poem:

He laughed like an irresponsible fetus.
His laughter was submarine and profound
Like the old man of the sea's
Hidden under coral islands
Where worried bodies of drowned man drift down in the green silence,
Dropping from fingers of surf.

The comparison of Mr. Apollinax's laughter to that of an irresponsible fetus is far-fetched and is, undoubtedly, a conceit. Again, his laughter, which is described as submarine and profound, is compared to the old man in the sea who is hiding in the coral island. This too is an instance of mixing 'levity and seriousness' which constitutes a metaphysical wit.

Another characteristic of metaphysical poetry that has been detected in the poem is that of the association of ideas in a rapid manner. This happens in the opening lines of the second stanza of the poem:

I looked for the head of Mr. Apollinax rolling under a chair
Or grinning over a screen
With seaweed in its hair.

In connection with these lines, D.E.S. Maxwell opines:

It is by the association of Apollinax with 'the worried bodies of drowned men', tugged by ocean currents that this image is aroused. Its connection with the previous lines, though not overtly stated, is implicit, and this swift elaboration of the initial idea is equally a characteristic of metaphysical poetry. (53)

From the analysis of the three poems, it has become clear that they contain some of the essential characteristics of metaphysical poetry such as obscurity, conceits, unified sensibility, witticism, imageries and paradoxes. Eliot, indeed, played an important role in further extending and continuing the metaphysical tradition in the 20th century.

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