

Concept of Time and Space with reference to T.S.Eliot's Major Poems

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Abstract. With the advent of modern science and technology new concepts are used in poetry. Though time and space have been talked about by ancient writers as Aristotle and Plato, its usage in the modern scenario has changed greatly. Eliot in his writings has used three kinds of spaces apart from the geographical setting. They are exterior spaces, interior spaces and the liminal spaces. The spacing or the spatial setting matters as well. It creates a visual image. It also refers to stylistic and structural features. Use of time can be brought out clearly by using myths. Myth also indicates the circular pattern of time. Eliot accentuates the idea of past being in the present and both occurring in the future by using myth. The ubiquitous nature of myth makes it recur in time and space.

Keywords: Time; space; spatial setting; geographical space; myth.

From around 1880 to the outbreak of First World War a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space. Technological innovations including the telephone, wireless telegraph, x-ray, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane established the material foundation for this reorientation; the independent cultural developments such as the stream-of-consciousness novel, psychoanalysis, Cubism and the theory of relativity shaped consciousness directly. The result was a transformation of the dimensions of life and thought. A change in the view of time and space happened in literature as well, as painters and novelists faced contrasting challenges in reproducing the dimensions of experience. For example, James Joyce narrated events from a number of points of view in order to give a fuller sense of them. Not only novelists were affected by this change, but poets as well. Kern writes :

While empty space and silence were used as subjects of novels and short stories, in poetry there was a formal shift in the conception of the poem from an arrangement of words to a composition of words and the blank spaces between them.

(Kern 2003 : 49)

Eliot certainly plays with these 'blank spaces' in his poetry. Often his poems move abruptly from one setting to another, forcing the reader to mentally transport oneself to a new space to keep pace with the narrator of the poem. Among the three modes of time, the sense of the past was not qualitatively different from older notions,

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although its influence on the present was given more weight. The sense of the future, largely a reconstruction of past experience projected ahead in time, also resembled older experiential modes. The sense of the present was the most distinctively new, thickened temporarily with retentions and pretensions of past and future and, most important, and expanded spatially to create the vast shared experience of simultaneity. The present was no longer limited to one event in one place, sandwiched tightly between past and future and limited to local surroundings. In an age of intrusive electronic communication “now” became an extended interval of time that could, indeed must, include events around the world.

T.S.Eliot came on the literary horizon in the twentieth century. With the possible exception of Yeats, no other poet of this century has been held in such esteem by his fellow poets as Eliot. During the 1930’s his influence was enormous, and, if his pre-eminence is no longer so stridently proclaimed, he seems assured of his place among the great English poets who have directed poetic impulses into new channels. The irregularities of rhyme scheme and line length in his verse form, the pressure of his condensed and often vividly contrasted images, the skilful use of rhythmic variations, and the restrained power of his style distinguished Eliot as a gifted, original artist. As a poet, he transmuted his affinity for the English metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century (most notably John Donne) and the nineteenth century French symbolist poets (including Baudelaire and Laforgue) into radical innovations in poetic technique and subject matter. His poems in many respects articulated the disillusionment of a younger post - First World War generation with the values and conventions – both literary and social– of the Victorian era.

Eliot’s early philosophical work in fact provides a rich source for mapping the development of his major literary intellectual and religious pre-occupations. As is known, Eliot pursued philosophical questions throughout his career. Though he renounced philosophy for poetry, he insightfully attacked these questions in criticism, social theory and poetry. The relationship of philosophy and poetry, and consequently thought and feeling, remained one of his lifelong concerns. Eliot had deep interest in philosophy. Eliot’s study of philosophy played a very significant role in the formation of his sensibility. Manju Jain points out:

Eliot chose to give up the prospect of an academic career in philosophy for poetry, preferring to remain as a man of letters in England rather than return to America to become a professor of philosophy. Eliot renounced philosophy for poetry although his philosophical interests were never wholly divorced from his literary concerns and creative endeavours. (Jain 1992 : x)

Eliot gave up philosophy for poetry, yet his philosophical interests always ruled over him. Eliot admitted that when a poet has pursued philosophical studies, these will have played an important part in his formation and will have informed his poetry. The poetry of T.S. Eliot manifests his philosophical bent of mind. Being a serious scholar of philosophy, he has used various philosophical concepts in his poetry. Manju Jain again observes :

In his discussion of the relationship of philosophy and poetry the crucial distinction that Eliot makes is that between theory and vision. Philosophy is the statement of a theory; poetry is the embodiment of a concrete vision... However, if poetry, for Eliot, expresses a vision of life and not a theory, this vision is in complete if it does not include some philosophy...(246)

Universality transcends the limitations of time, space and region, caste, colour and creed. Eliot is decidedly a 'universal' poet of the first rank. He is an American by birth, a British by professed religion and naturalized citizenship, a European by culture and tradition, and an internationalist by philosophical outlook upon life. One has to recollect that Eliot as a true 'universalist' has used at least six foreign languages and thirty five authors in *The Waste Land* alone.

Time and place have huge symbolic significance in Eliot's work and that of his contemporaries. Space and time exist as symbolical, religious, philosophical, historical, political and personal 'nodes' in Eliot's writings. The semantic scope of the concept of space depends strongly on the context in which it appears. In recent literary criticism it is often used as a metaphor for a literary work. There has also been an increased interest in geographical space, which is – similarly to narrative time – an integral part of every narration. The notion of space too played an important role in the poetry of T. S. Eliot. Not only does space appear, but it is also clear that Eliot put much time and effort into including descriptive, meaningful settings in his poetry. Different categories of space began occurring over and over again; the various rooms Eliot writes of comprise an arena of interior space; the many street scenes that appear in his poetry comprise exterior space and the thresholds between the interior and exterior spaces became a category in themselves – the liminal spaces. Eliot parallels the physical space occupied by his characters with the actions they take and the thoughts they have – and ultimately connects them to a level of humanity or meaning present in their lives.

Frank reads *The Waste Land* with respect to spatial elements rather than through a linear movement in time. If we take the concept of 'space' literally, we find that the poem's spatiality can be seen in its sudden shifts from one place to another. In the poem place is not merely a background or setting. The first eighteen

lines of *The Waste Land* for instance, move spatially from the 'dead land', to 'Stambergersee' to the 'Hofgarten', and then to 'the mountains'. Actions and objects are identified according to space, as in:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
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...
(Eliot 1922 : 62-67)

In this image, Eliot produces space through the movement of the crowd from one location to another. Eliot focuses on certain places, juxtaposing them spatially in order to create a movement in space. The three places mentioned are distinctive areas in London and so we get an image of a specific location through the juxtaposition of these places. Spatial form then can be seen in terms of poetry that deals with geographical space.

Space in *The Waste Land* is created out of visual images. And when we examine these images we examine Eliot's way of arranging them. Spatial form refers to stylistic and structural features, that is how the elements are organised and those are the ways of reading poetry. The difficulty of reading *The Waste Land* comes from Eliot's use of the spatial form which compels the reader to re-read the lines and to revise one's apprehension. The reader will soon be aware of repetitions which create a spatial pattern. For example, in 'What the Thunder said' Eliot writes:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water...
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think...
If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock... (331-351)

These lines create a spatial pattern through the repetition of words like 'rock' and 'water' which obliges the reader to re-examine the connections and to question the relation between these repetitions. This passage violates the common rules of syntax as understood by the ordinary reader. Reading these lines requires that the reader should hold all the lines in his mind in order to grasp the relation between these

word groups. The spatial form is manifest in that these lines do not follow sequentially or consecutively but spatially; they are juxtaposed in a way as to create a spatial scheme. Thus, spatial form in the poem requires a special reading.

Myth and archetype are new additions to the various literary devices in use such as metaphor, imagery and symbol. Myth is very distinct. Besides working as a literary device, it also works as a tool to bring order, as Eliot says, "to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history". (Eliot 1923 : 483) It does so by being ubiquitous in time and place, by connecting the past, present and future in a chain and by being universal because of its attachment to the complex psychic predispositions inherited by human beings. Metaphor, imagery and symbol also help in the poetic use of language. But myth has proved to be a much more useful tool. Here the poet can achieve more of "ambivalence", more suggestiveness, and more expansion of meaning by saying so many things with so little. It is ubiquitous in time and place. It is concerned with the past cultural traditions or modes of beliefs. It is also connected with the present values. It then reaches toward man's future hopes and aspirations. With the use of myth, the poet can cover past, present and future so easily. The mythical wasteland is the analogue for the modern world of spiritual barrenness. But Eliot has widened its scope by combining with it the classical waste land of King Oedipus and the barren land of the Christian Bible. The classical association is symbolised by Tiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes, "the old man with wrinkled female breast", who is introduced as protagonist of the poem. He stands for the human consciousness, connecting the present with the past and his vision, which is the substance of the poem, is a series of flashes, backward and forward, like those in a film. This poem is a fine illustration of the basic technique of the mythical method which makes us surpass both time and space by making us swing in time and space so that we can cover the immense vastness of human consciousness and realise the grim intensity of the human feeling of pain and hope and also feel, in ourselves, the universal and timeless tragic situation of man and his life. Through this method Eliot makes us think not only of the pastness of the past but also of its presence. It means that this spiritual barrenness or death is at once temporal and timeless and the scene is London or any capital in Europe or any place, anywhere, in any period of history. There is the message of deliverance, coming at the end, from the voice of Prajapati speaking in thunder – Give, sympathise, control. It is a remedy discovered by human wisdom in the past and therefore, valid for the present and future also, because the disease is recurring :

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining perpetual possibility... (Eliot 2015 : 7)

"Four Quartets" was originally not written as one poem. Burnt Norton was published in 1935 and the other three sections were written between 1939 to 1945 during the Second World War. Therefore the experiences of Burnt Norton are different from the experiences of "East Coker", "The Dry Salvages" and "Little Gidding". One similarity between all the four sections is that the title of each section refers to an actual place. Helen Gardner compares Burnt Norton with New Hampshire and also to a house and garden called Burnt Norton on the edge of Cotswold escarpment overlooking the Vale of Evesham and a distant view of the Malvern and Welst hills. The garden of Burnt Norton was a place which in its stillness and beauty and strange remoteness from the world, stirred in Eliot profound memories and brought together disparate experiences and literary echoes. The description of garden and related imagery could be inspired by the garden of Burnt Norton. The memories are all mixed in this surrounding and perhaps that is what inspires the poet to think 'time future' contained in 'time past'. Besides the conception of time, Eliot has constantly used the imagery of rose-garden in Burnt Norton. Rose garden is a symbol of the moment where all times are drawn together and also of the moment eternally out of time, i.e., the moment immediate to God.

If time and space, as sages say,
Are things which cannot be,
The sun which does not feel decay
No greater is than we.
So why, Love, should we ever pray
To live a century?
The butterfly that lives a day
Has lived eternity. (Eliot, 1-8)

The concept of time and space is complex and has gained new perspective with the advent of modern science. Since all experience takes place in time and space, the two categories provide a comprehensive framework that can include wide-ranging cultural developments as Cubism, simultaneous poetry, and ragtime music along with the steamship, skyscraper, and machine gun. It gave new dimensions to poetry and time and space were seen in a completely new perspective in modern poetry.

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