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Subject Area - English Literature

TS Eliot

How are issues of faith or belief represented in T.S.Eliot's The Waste Land?

Faith and belief, or the lack of it, has always played a major part in T.S. Eliot's canon; perhaps more than any other Modernist writer, Eliot reflects the zeitgeist that was described by Spears Brooker (1994) as "characterized by a collapse of faith in human innate goodness and in the inevitability of progress." (Brooker Spears, 1994, p.61) To this end, this paper looks at how such issues are represented in Eliot's early work The Waste Land (1989) that, as we shall see, can be thought of as paradigmatic of both Modernist notions of the role of faith in society and Eliot's own relationship to an increasingly orthodox spirituality.

As Hugh Kenner (1965) details, issues of faith and belief, in The Waste Land, are inextricably linked with that other depiction of European decay Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1994):

"It had for an epitaph a phrase from Conrad's Heart of Darkness ("The horror! The horror!"); embedded in the text were a glimpse, borrowed from Conrad's opening page, of the red sails of barges drifting in the Thames Estuary, and a contrasting reference to the "the heart of light".

Like Conrad's novel, Eliot's poem depicts the gradual decay of Judeo-Christian European society from the inside; the opening imagery of The Waste Land contributes to the over all sense of a fetid, past glory that is no longer relevant and that is no longer able to sustain life:

"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of the stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter"

Of course we are reminded here of both Christ's temptation (Luke, 4:2) and of the passages in Frazer's The Golden Bough (1994, p.60) that deal with the kinds of severe drought that inspires the rain-dance mythologies in many indigenous cultures. Throughout the first section of the poem, Eliot presents the reader with image upon 'broken' image of dryness, shallowness and unreality. We see the "dry stone no sound of water", the "handful of dust" and the "Unreal City/ under the brown fog of a winter dawn" (Eliot, 1989, pp.61-62) all of which point to an arid landscape devoid of a spiritual centre.

However, it is made clear through Eliot's use of heterogeneous cultural references that, unlike, Conrad, what concerns him is not so much the specific failure of Judeo-Christian faith but faith in general. Throughout the poem, Eliot visits and revisits all manner of belief systems – Buddhism in 'The Fire Sermon', Christianity in 'What the Thunder Said' (through references to 'the Rock', an image he was to take up, of course, later on in his life after his conversion), Greek pantheism, pagan ritual and so on – and finds none of them able to give life or meaning to post-War Europe. If Heart of

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Darkness represented the horror of the decline of the Western Enlightenment, The Waste Land represents the horror of the emptiness that ensues when faith no longer provides the basis for ontological existence.

As Maxwell (1960, p.90) details, The Waste Land, both in its imagery and its structure, depicts a society not so much devoid of faiths, as religions systems of belief, but of faith as a teleological process, providing both a sense of history and progression. In 'The Burial of the Dead', for instance, this loss is suggested in the metaphor of the rootless tree, or in the buried corpse:

“That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?”

Later on in the poem, Eliot revisits this theme of a dead, empty Nature and concretises its use as a metaphor for spirituality in early Twentieth Century Europe:

“The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard”

It is in this section ('The Fire Sermon') that Eliot introduces the figure of Tiresias, the blind seer of Sophocles. As Bernard F. Dick (1986) suggests, Tiresias represents a figure of unheeded proclamation and is symbolic of traditional faith and experience; as in Oedipus Rex, the old man “with wrinkled female breasts” (Eliot, 1989, p.68) is ignored by the inhabitants of the city who know only the everyday and the rootless sense of a present without a past or a future. Like Oedipus, Eliot suggests that, in fact it is the Londoners of his poem and by extension all of Twentieth Century Europe, who are really sightless, blind to their own fate and lack of faith.

Many critics (Jay, 1986; Childs, 2001 etc) have made mention of Eliot describing Tiresias as “the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.” (Eliot, 1989, p. 78) Whereas this could be seen as an example of Eliot's famed obfuscation, in the light of our discussion here, concerning Tiresias as symbolic of tradition and faith in the midst of post-War European decay, could we not suggest that what he represents is the uniting forces of entrenched belief? What Lyotard was to call in The Postmodern Condition “the grand narrative” (2000, p.xxiii) of religion, that gives meaning and structure to societies and individuals. The seer, then, becomes a residue of that which has passed, a symbol of inner vision and unification in a faithless world.

The structure of the poem itself is a reflection of this de-centered, faithless society; it is non-hierarchical, heterogeneous and fractured. The lack of any textual cohesion, as Bentley and Spears Brooker (1990, p.78) state is a mirror to the lack of spiritual cohesion in the wider social field, as religions and cultural allusions are referenced and then forgotten, as in the concluding lines:

“Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon – O swallow swallow
Le Prine d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie

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These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih”

Here Eliot articulates the multivocality of a society devoid of any coherent spiritual centre; we can recognise reflections of Dante's Catholicism, madness and mysticism in Gerard de Nerval (line 429) and the final words of the Hindu Upanishad, all of which combine to produce a surplus of meaning that, ultimately, is rendered unintelligible.

It is tempting to see Eliot's depiction of faith and belief in *The Waste Land* as merely a critique of Twentieth Century post-war Europe, perhaps only another articulation of the kinds of Modernist socio-spiritual pessimism that Yeats expressed a year earlier in his poem 'The Second Coming':

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed onto the world”

However, as Peter Ackroyd suggests in his biography of Eliot (1984), *The Waste Land* was as much a reflection of the poet's own spiritual morass after the First World War as the society's and, when placed into the context of his entire oeuvre provides the basis for poems such as *Choruses from the Rock* and *Ariel* that show his own religious journey from pessimistic atheism to an orthodox Christianity.

In many ways, then issues of faith and belief in *The Waste Land* are represented through their absence; as Ackroyd says “It was Eliot's belief that if Christianity disappeared our civilization would disappear with it” (Ackroyd, 1984, p.249) and *The Waste Land* represents a world where exactly that has happened, where the heart of society is revealed as being not so much dark as empty or missing altogether; for Eliot an infinitely more terrifying prospect.

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