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Modern Elements in *The Waste Land*

T.S. Eliot, a modern poet in the 20th century, is known as one of the first modern writers. Before his time, poetry was written with specific form, meter, and rhythm. T.S. Eliot and the other modern poets look to change that structure of writing poetry. This change in writing is brought out by the Great War in Europe, later known to be World War I. The war causes chaos and confusion among the people in Europe, especially after the conclusion of the war when Europe is left in destruction. There are never words to describe such a tragic event, and it is not easy for writers to continue writing cheery, rhyming poems when they are surrounded by their homeland in ruins. Emerging from this world crisis is literary chaos, or modernism. According to David Rosen in his scholarly article “T.S. Eliot and the Lost Youth of Modern Poetry,” the external causes of modernism are, “social and intellectual developments that both [alter] the cultural status of literature generally and [open] new forms of expression for it to pursue” (Rosen 475). T.S. Eliot is a modern poet who changes the way that poets write and opens different forms of expression. Because of the literary anxiety instilled in the modern writers in the 20th century, elements such as competing voices, fragments, and quoting are used in response. In his iconic work, *The Waste Land,* Eliot changes the form and tradition of poetry and thus dampens future creativity for writers who follow him. These elements are especially unique in Eliot’s *The Waste Land.*

An element that modern poetry possesses is a sense of belatedness. This “sense of endings” is, according to Christopher Ames, “a perception of belatedness that [is] especially acute in its literary manifestations” (Ames 3). Ames writes that the modern period is known for its sense of belatedness. Writer’s response to this is, “a literary anxiety instilled by the increasingly codified ‘tradition’” (3). There is a worried nature within modern works. Some could be due to authority, or the fear that the writer is not qualified to be writing on the topic at hand, and other fears due to the post-enlightenment idea that suffering is meaningless and therefore life is meaningless. Whatever is the cause of this literary anxiety, Eliot and the other modern writers write about the feeling of crisis. *The Waste Land* is a poem about chaos and crisis after World War I, and the crisis that Europe feels is also articulated in the way that Eliot writes. An example of this chaos and response to anxiety in *The Waste Land* is the title of the work itself. Waste land represents barren land that cannot produce life any longer. This is representative for the decay of the modern world and points to the decomposition of the modern world itself. This analogy makes sense in the context of post-war life when Europe feels and looks like a physical and symbolic waste land of culture, morals, and humanity. The poetic element of anxiety within a work is new to modern poetry and is something that is used uniquely by Eliot, beginning with the title of his work.

This chaos and emptiness that Eliot feels forces him to try and prove why he needs to write what he does. This state of worry, according to Francis O’Gorman, is, “a marker of a modern world” (O’Gorman 1005). A modern poetic element that Eliot and other poets use in response to belatedness is quoting. Eliot feels that the greats before him in literature must remain in his own writings. Ames writes that, “Modernist experimentation forges strategies for transforming a disabling tradition into an enabling artistic arena of competing voices...modern writers seem to have felt the past itself as a weight upon their shoulders” (4). Eliot experiences this anxiety of feeling as if there is a weight of the past on his shoulders. Many moderns feel this anxiety and respond to it by the method of quoting. Constantly throughout *The Waste Land,* there are often references to the past included in the work. These references are not necessarily historical and not easy to pick out, especially if one is uneducated. For instance, in line 43 of *The Waste Land,* Eliot writes about a woman named Madame Sosostris. The average, undereducated reader of this work would probably not understand this reference and would need to consult the footnotes or an encyclopedia to understand that, “Eliot derived the name from ‘Sesostris, the Sorceress of Ectabana,’ the pseudo-Egyptian name assumed by a woman who tells fortunes in Aldous Huxley’s novel *Chrome Yellow.* Sesostris was a 12th dynasty Egyptian king” (Eliot 827). Without prior knowledge of Ancient Egypt, one would not understand the brief reference to Egyptian royalty. This is just one example of many where Eliot is found quoting past works of literature, history, or cultures. Not only should the reader be well versed in Egyptian history, Eliot cites Greek myths, The Bible, famous works of fiction, Roman history, Elizabethan poetry, and many other works of art. This literary need to quote other authors is a response to the sense of endings that modern poets feel.

Although there is not an outward problem with poetry that is on a high intellectual level, it can begin to create problems if most writers participate in this trend. *The Waste Land* is clearly at an advanced intellectual level, but it is not just this poem that follows this pattern. Many of Eliot’s other poems are similar. In fact, according to Ames, “Modernist strategies provided a temporary enabling solution for modernist belatedness, but they in turn became traditions that were themselves susceptible to parody” (Ames 6). Ames points out that it became a trend among the modern poets during and after the time of Eliot to continue to parody the strategies that he created. This, instead of resolving the fear of belatedness, allows the culture to only become more worried and fearful of a disjointed society. These strategies that were used became traditions that are still used in the post-modern world.

This change of culture that modern poets such as Eliot create cause a change in the tradition of writing. Ames writes that, “Eliot captures the state of contemporary learning. To today’s students, encountering *The Waste Land,* as often as not, in an anthology ornamented with Eliot’s footnotes as well as an editor's, the work is of a piece with how they must feel trying to grasp the literary past” (Ames 9). Students are unable to read *The Waste Land*  without the help of the footnotes, and these fragmented footnotes in *The Waste Land* are how students try and understand other literature of the past. Ames writes that, “‘Tradition’ becomes both a name for the potentially animating influence of past literature and for the disabling vision of belatedness that the modern writer must resist” (9). Although tradition is often looked upon as a good thing, this tradition of belatedness and worry can be crippling for students when they first attempt to come to terms with literature and history through modern poetry.

Although Eliot is iconic in the way he changes the format of poetry, he also has a part in dampening the creativity of future writers. He, along with the other modern poets, because of their excessive quoting and fragments, make it difficult for anyone to write if they parody the traditions of Eliot. Ames writes that, “the enabling strategies of the modernist generation, the invigorating ambivalence of quotation, fragmentation and parody, exhausted a certain literary ground” (Ames 19). Ames is saying that because of the overuse of certain literary techniques such as quotation and parody, it becomes difficult for anyone to write after Eliot because they may not be completely versed in the kinds of history and literature that Eliot writes about in *The Waste Land.*

All of this change in poetry stems from the crisis that people feel after the First World War. Many look at their demolished homeland, like Eliot, and see a wasteland. The response is to change how poetry is written and Eliot is instrumental in creating this change. The war causes a sense of endings in writers and their response is anxiety that causes their writings to become fragmented and filled with quotations and references to other works of literature. Because of this change, it becomes difficult for other writers to continue after authors like Eliot and Pound because their attention to detail and use of quotation extinguishes creativity among later authors. Writers after these men still feel as if they should write in the form that the modernists write because their writing becomes literary tradition and that is how people should compose poetry still today. This creates an even greater sense of anxiety because there is a fear that poetry will not be sufficient unless one is well versed in literature and history. Because many students and writers feel this sense of anxiety, a divide is created between the modern poets and the current society that is lacking creativity in the form of poetry. T.S. Eliot is an influential poet who changes the way that poetry is written, but when that change becomes tradition, creativity within new writers is dampened, and the post-war anxiety never completely disappears.

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