

THE URBAN SPACE AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEM: RE-READING T. S. ELIOT'S

PRELUDES

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism seeks to read texts from the ecological perspective and the practice has gained significance in recent times, especially after the publication of books like Cheryll Glotfelty's The Ecocriticism Reader, Scott Slovic's Seeking Awareness, Jonathan Bate's The Song of the Earth, and Lawrence Buell's The Environmental Imagination amongst many other notable works. Mention must also be made of the contribution of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment) which helped this branch of criticism to expand and become popular. Where other branches of literary criticism primarily focus on man's relationship with the society, eco-criticism focuses on studying man's relationship with the environment. The environment today is a threat. Most literate people are aware that global warming is responsible for the melting of polar ice, which is making the sea level rise, that deforestation leads to an oxygen crisis in the atmosphere, that there is a hole in the ozone layer, etc. But mere awareness has not and will not lead to any corrective measures. Human beings must become more conscious of their place in the ecosphere and understand that environmental pollution, natural calamities and climate changes will affect them sooner or later. Literature can play an effective role in making people conscious by highlighting the connection between them and the environment. Ecocriticism is clear about its purpose, but does not use any proper methodology and that has saved it from being an esoteric branch of criticism. It can hardly be useful by just earning accolades from scholars in a seminar room.

KEYWORDS: *Ecocriticism, Urban, Environment, Eliot, Poetry*

INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism has paid a lot of attention to Romantic poetry because the ecological concerns of the Romantic poets are rather explicit. However, it will be extremely wrong to neglect the ecological concerns of the poets of the other eras. Modern poetry, for instance, with its interest in the degeneration of industrial civilization often offers rich material for ecocriticism as well. Elizabeth Black rightly says in *Ecocritical Eliot*, "...modernism, perhaps due to its associations with anthropocentric psychological concerns and linguistic and formal experimentation, has yet to receive adequate ecocritical attention" (1). What is often missed is the concern of modernist poetry with the impact of modernity which has separated man from living a meaningful life in harmony with his environment. Man is portrayed in modern poetry as a being dwelling in the urban space, leading a life devoid of meaning and spiritual significance, and, most importantly, as one utterly alienated from Nature. Dwelling in the city can be argued as a matter of choice but it cannot be denied that the city lacks connectivity with Nature. After the industrial revolution, especially, man's reliance on survival shifted from nature to the industry and the urban spaces and this shift have resulted in a lack of contact with the physical environment.

T. S. Eliot's magnum opus, *The Waste Land*, deals with the crisis, which is a direct consequence of that alienation and his later major work, *Four Quartets*, is an attempt to regain peace and fulfillment by re-establishing that connection.

The reason for choosing T. S. Eliot's *Preludes* for analysis from the ecological perspective in this paper is the poem's concern with the immediate environment, the urban space. Readers who inhabit the urban spaces in the post-industrial revolution times can easily relate to the images employed by the poet in the poem. The purpose of this paper is not to argue about the focus of Eliot's poetic scheme, but what the poem tells us about the environment. Modern man or the modern condition is definitely the main subject of the poem, but the effects of modernity are not limited to man only. They affect the environment as much as they affect man. This poem also finds the place quite frequently in the English Literature syllabus at the school level and that enhances the poem's significance. Eco-criticism can hardly be useful by being popular within the academic circles only; rather it should be able to reach the masses. English Literature becomes a specialized branch of studies at the undergraduate level, but at the school level it reaches out to more numbers.

The poem begins with a reference to a time frame-'The winter evening'-which conventionally connotes the end of a working day in an industrial scenario (Eliot 1). The reference to the time frame is important for two reasons. Firstly, it relates to Eliot's primary concern- the effects of industrial modernity on those associated with it directly or indirectly. The evening is the time when man's preoccupations, other than work, come to the forefront. Secondly, it draws our attention to a season which is not particularly a pleasant one for those living in the US and Europe. Winter has traditionally been associated with inaction, death, and lifelessness in English poetry. In the next few lines, Eliot portrays the sensory experience of that part of the day. The 'smell of steaks' is definitely a negative sensory experience when we keep in mind that Eliot's scene is located in the industrial 'passageways' where the smell has little space to escape (2). There is also in the word 'steak' a lingering awareness somewhere of the brutal butchering of animals (2). The smell of burning meat does create a charnel house like atmosphere, but the unaesthetic impression is often overlooked. At 'six o'clock' what remains is just the 'burnt-out ends of smoky days' (3-4). Thomas Gray's famous poem, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, deals with a similar time frame albeit in an utterly different setting:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
 The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,
 The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
 And leaves the world to darkness and to me. (Gray 1-4)

Gray admits that country life is without glory in the material sense of the term, but he can talk about its positive impact on the mind and soul of man:

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
 Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
 Along the cool sequestered vale of life
 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way. (Gray 73-76)

Eliot can only highlight the spiritually challenging and physically and emotionally draining nature of city life. The metaphor comparing a day with a cigarette, a popular intoxicant in industrial scenarios, is again a disturbing image. Today,

people are aware that tobacco affects the health of man, but the effect of the smoke on the immediate environment is often overlooked. Of course, the notion of passive smoking is spreading pretty quickly, but, I believe, that in Eliot's scheme of things, the image is added to intensify the earlier nasal experience. Smoke in the absence of escape routes lingers in the environment, adding to the negative experience.

The shower that starts all of a sudden in a winter evening does not cleanse the environment in any way whatsoever. Showers during chilly winters are not welcome in any case, but the fact that it makes the environment dirtier than before is a rather disturbing reality in the urban space. The 'grimy scraps' of 'withered leaves' around the feet and 'newspapers from vacant lots' add up to form a negative visual experience (5-8). Quite interestingly, Eliot keeps drawing our attention to the physical experience of the environment and that, I guess, paves the way for ecocriticism because of its concern with the physical environment. Steaks and cigarettes are negative nasal experiences and the leaves and newspapers during the shower create a negative visual experience. Eliot ends the first section of the poem by referring to the 'lonely cab-horse' which is busy beating the cold by stamping its feet and then to 'the lighting of the lamps' which signifies the movement of the evening into the night (12-13).

The second section of the poem also begins with a reference to a time frame, but this time it is the morning. However, the first section has already done its part and has trained the readers not to expect the morning to be the harbinger of any positive change. Quite predictably, Eliot associates the time with 'faint stale smells of beer'-another negative nasal experience- to strip the image of any positivity that can be associated with it (14-15). Drinking beer after work is a common practice in the industrial settings, but the negative sensory experience that it generates is often overlooked. The contrast between the mornings expected and supposed freshness and the stale smell of beer helps to intensify the negativity of the experience. The morning does not offer a cleaner environment either. The earlier night's shower and snowfall have ensured that the morning will only offer a 'sawdust-trampled street' and 'muddy feet' (16-17). I dare not say that even coffee generates a negative sensory experience, but the consistency of the nature of the images used before tends to make us think of it in the same manner.

The soiled environment attempts to invade the domestic sphere as well. Eliot communicates that to us by portraying the 'dingy shades' that the struggle to protect the 'thousand furnished rooms' (22-23). It is not possible to keep the shades shut forever for that will mean shutting the environment altogether and once opened the dirt will find its way in. The home, in other words, is not safe from the pollution of the environment. The expression 'thousand furnished rooms' is extremely important from the viewpoint of ecocriticism because where individuals ensure cleanliness, hygiene, and sanitation within their respective homes they take little action to do the same for the environment (23). The visible alienation between the home and the environment is stark. The adjective 'furnished' also suggests a sense of artificiality of the lives lived within the threshold of the domestic sphere (23).

The third section of the poem deals with the experience of prostitution both literally and symbolically. Prostitution is one of the most unnatural professions in modern society. Procreation is a natural process, but when it is turned into a profession that satisfies just the carnal desires it is stripped of its purpose and productivity. The sordidness of the experience affects both the prostitute and the customer. From the perspective of ecocriticism, it must be said that, besides being an unnatural practice, it also seriously undermines physical hygiene and can lead to numerous sexually transmitted diseases and no society should promote such an unhealthy exploitation of the female body. The poem focuses on the

effects of the practice on both the soul (mind) and the body. If the ‘thousand sordid images’ refer to the disturbed psychological condition then ‘yellow soles of feet’ and ‘the palms of both soiled hands’ refer to the diseased body (37-38). Eliot uses a gender-neutral language in this section to make the identity of the person denoted by the pronoun ‘you’ ambivalent. It can refer to both the exploiter and the exploited. It is not the prostitute only whose physical health is at stake. The exploiter is equally at threat. One of the main themes of this poem is the meaninglessness of life in modern times, but in this particular image, even a natural body function (reproduction) seems like a futile activity with multiple health hazards. This image also makes us re-read the other body functions mentioned in the earlier sections in the same light. Eating meat steaks, drinking beer and coffee, and breathing in tobacco smoke combine to create a negative impression of natural life processes in an industrial urban scenario.

The fourth section of the poem begins with the rather disturbing image of the soul being “stretched tight across the skies” (39). In the urban scenario, water bodies and landscapes are largely absent, and that leaves man only with a view of the sky if anyone desires to get a piece of Nature. Those who argue that London, the city which is the location of many important works of Eliot, is built on the banks of the Thames, should remember the way he describes its pollution in *The Waste Land*:

...empty bottles, sandwich papers

Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends.... (177-179)

Very little of the sky is actually visible as tall skyscrapers (‘city block’) hide it from view (40). Though Eliot does not mention the smoke from the chimneys, in an industrial setting they are bound to be present to pollute the view of the sky. The way Eliot has associated the sky with the human soul suggests pain as a physical reality for the latter. Urban life is challenging for the man at the spiritual level and Eliot is quick to move from the image and associate the soul with the street where it is ‘trampled by insistent feet’ (41). The street is symbolic of industrial urbanity and its ‘blackness’ can quite literally be the soot from the chimneys. The image is consistent with the other images of sordidness in the earlier sections of the poem. Of course, the word ‘conscience’ adds a spiritual and religious dimension to the image as well (46). The soul is not at peace, but restless and ‘impatient to assume the world’ (47). If the soul is taken as the natural state of man then what modernity offers the man is the very opposite of what he needs. The images remind us of William Blake’s *London* where he says:

I wander thro’ each charter’d street,

Near where the charter’d the Thames does flow.

And mark in every face I meet

Marks of weakness, marks of woe. (1-4)

The speaker of the poem, who effectively maintains an objective stance in the first three sections of the poem, turns compassionate in this section:

I am moved by fancies that are curled

Around these images, and cling:

The notion of some infinitely gentle

Infinitely suffering thing. (49-51)

Modern man is in a state of suffering, but he is probably unaware of it as well. Smoking tobacco pipes, reading newspapers, and drinking beer at the taverns is the preoccupations of the modern man after the end of the working hours. The contact with nature is visibly absent. Eliot's poem does well to hold a mirror to his condition. Eliot ends the poem by comparing the world's natural act of revolution with the 'ancient women/Gathering fuel in vacant lots' (53-54). The lack of a point of comparison proclaims man's alienation from natural processes in a loud voice. Man is unaware of the world revolution as he is busy gathering fuel for his survival.

To conclude, it must be said that Eliot's *Preludes* is an extremely significant poem from the ecological perspective. It portrays the industrial urban scenario and its impact on human life and environment with vivid details. The portrayal is alarming and should make man aware of the crisis he is in.

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