MULTIPLE VOICES IN T.S. ELIOT'S
THE WASTE LAND

Postgraduate, Chen Silin
Tutor, Professor Lin Yijin

Department of Foreign Languages & Literature
Xiamen University
April 1990
Contents

Chapter One
Introduction.............................................. 1
  1. His Life .............................................. 4
  2. Intellectual Background ............................. 5
  3. Literary Background .................................. 8

Chapter Two
Analysis of the Multiple Voices in the Whole Land ..... 11
  1. The Voices in Part One "The Burial of Death" .... 11
  2. The Voices in Part Two "A Game of Chess" ..... 14
  3. The Voices in Part Three "The Fire sermon" ..... 16
  4. The Voices in Part Four "Death by Noh" .... 19
  5. The Voices in Part Five "What the Thunder Said" .............................................. 20

Chapter Three
Justification and Strength of the Multiple Voices
as a Technique ........................................... 27
  1. Justification of the Multiple Voices ............... 27
  2. Strength of the Multiple Voices as a Technique

................................................................. 32
Chapter Four

Unity of The Poem Emerged from the Multiple Voices

1. Unity of Theme in the Poem

2. Unity of Form in the Poem
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

There was a great event in the literary world in 1922—the publication of *The Waste Land*, the most important work of T.S. Eliot (1888–1965). It exerted an immediate and powerful influence on the intelligentsia of the post-World War I generation. In the early years after its publication, the poem was highly controversial. Some critics regarded it too obscure and bookish.

"... Eliot has revealed a kind of bookish weakness in turning for his structure to literature rather than to life, it should be recollected that Shakespeare himself created hardly any of his plots, and by the very fact of taking ready-made the pattern of his characters' actions, he could devote his undivided attention to endowing them with life."

But most critics thought favourably of it. In his *The Lamp and the Light* (1929) Professor E. W. B. Dobson comments,

"I would be prepared to lay odds that the year 1922, which saw *The Waste Land*, will prove to be as important a year in the history of the development of English poetry as the year 1798..."
Michael H. Levenson remarks:

"After the publication of The Waste Land, he moved steadily and rapidly toward a position of literary dominance. If he never won popular affection, he at least inspired awe...he came to exemplify English modernism, since he presided over the changes in its definition and presentation, and since he wrote his most celebrated work."  

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) called the poem "the justification of the 'movement' of our modern experiment, since 1900." Now it is generally accepted as both the embodiment of the doubts and the disillusionments of an age and renovation of a new technique in poetry and as one of the milestones in modern literature of the Western world.

The poem consists altogether of 434 lines divided into five parts. They are in sequence "The Burial of the Dead", "A Game of Chess", "The Fire Sermon", "Death by Water", and "What the Thunder Said". Later Eliot added 7 pages of notes. The poem is extremely sophisticated — heavily loaded with echoes and allusions. Eliot manages to include quotations from, allusions to, or imitations of, at
least thirty-five different writers as well as several popular songs. Lines of German, French and Italian are thrown in at will or whim. There are many voices, or fragments in it, which itself seems not to offer coherence. As a result, the poem is not a "dinch" for ordinary readers:

"... meaning, plan, and intention alike are massed behind a smoke-screen of anthropological and literary erudition, and only the pundit, the pedant, or the clairvoyant will be in the least aware of them. Dr Frazer and Miss J. L. Weston are free and admittedly his creditors, and the bulk of the poem is under an enormously composite and cosmopolitan mortgage...".5

Even if after so many scholarly analyses for the past few decades, the poem still remains enigmatic,

"To the best minds it remains a challenge, to students an ordeal, and to common readers a sphinx's riddle. This is perhaps, as in the case of Hamlet, the reason for its fascination. The undefinable meaning is its truth." 6

This is especially true to the Chinese students. This thesis is to be devoted to the analysis of one of the most outstanding features of the poem: the multiple voices. But first let's
got a glimpse of his life, the intellectual and literary backgrounds around 1922.

1. His Life

T.S. Eliot was a highly-acclaimed poet, literary critic, and playwright. He was dominant in the literary field for several decades. His achievements finally made him the winner of the Nobel Prize in 1948. Few men of letters have been more fully honoured in their own days than T.S. Eliot.

Born into an intellectual family, Thomas Stearns Eliot received a very broad education at Harvard University in America, the Sorbonne in Paris and Oxford University in England. His studies included languages, literature and philosophy. His doctoral dissertation is on the philosophy of F. E. H. Bradley (1846-1924), the author of Appearance and Reality.

Eliot's works are relatively less as compared with other major authors. But they are very outstanding. His excellence has generally been recognised ever since the appearance of his first major poem, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (1917). His other important works include The Sacred Wood (1920), The Waste Land (1922), The Hollow Men (1925) and Ash Wednesday (1930).
Murdor in the Cathedral (1935) and Four Quartets (1943).

All these are among the best of the 20-century literary works.

Having unquestionably a mind of rare distinction, Eliot has solved his own problem as a poet. His influence has been more effective in that he is a poet as well as a critic, and his criticism and his poetry reinforce each other. Though he has been criticized for obscurity, there has been little doubt of his craftsmanship and integrity. He was a poet of a whole generation.

2. Intellectual Background

In the last decades of the 19th century and the early ones of the 20th century science and technology developed remarkably. There were many inventions that made life easier and easier. There existed seeming surplus of material in society as a result of industrial revolution and colonial expansion. Many people felt optimistic about the capitalism and the future. But during the years from 1914-1918, the world went through one of its most severe sufferings in the history—the World War I, which killed a whole generation of the world's most promising young men and laid waste a large quantity of material and treasure. As a result, the
people no longer believed in science and their governments which seemed to bring about the disaster and destruction together. Now almost all the traditions were put to testing and doubting: religious belief, ethical codes, aesthetic principles, mode of thinking and what not. Scientific inventions and the riches of material resulting from the industrial revolution could not eradicate people’s worries from life, but engendered conflicts, quarrels and war between the countries. They began to doubt that rationality and knowledge had any promising land into which they might be led. Knowledge doesn’t ensure faith. Instead it is more likely to destroy it. They were disillusioned and sceptical of almost everything. They became the lost generation.

Some philosophical publications then also helped to mould this pessimistic consciousness of the generation loss of belief. F.H. Bradley, an English philosopher, published his Appearance And Reality in 1893 in which he assumes most of our knowledge of the world are confusing and misleading because we are describing mere appearance instead of reality. Many of his ideas constitute a part of a new movement questioning the 19th century thought. In 1897 appeared The Interpretation of Dream by Sigmund
Freud (1856–1939), an Austrian psychoanalyst. According to him, human behaviour is seldom the result of a rational decision but derives from the pressures of our consciousness, impulses and fears. Our actions are often disguised expression of sexual anxiety. His ideas made a great stir among the intellectual circles. His declaration reminds people of the unconscious, which had seldom been explored by thinkers of the past hundred years. Meanwhile, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900), the German philosoper, had declared that God was dead. This was a bolt from the blue for most of the people because for the past hundred years God had been cherished and worshipped as the Almighty and Omnipotent in their mind. They had exhausted their spiritual supplies: some rushed about hunting for replacements in magic, other religions, drugs; others claimed that despondence was the only response to a chaotic world. There is more in Bertrand Russell's (1872–1970) A Free Man's Worship (1918). In the book, Russell says science has given us a description of a meaningless world, a world in which religious belief is not possible. Man must recognize that he is of no importance in such a world.
"Man is the product of causes which had no provision of the end they were achieving; his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental combinations of atoms that nothing can preserve as individual life beyond the grave, all the inspiration and other human achievements are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system. In short man's life is brief and powerless."  

To mention just a few of the publications at the turn of this century. This was the general state of the intellectual world then.

3. Literary Background

Around 1900, there were roughly two main schools in literature: realism and symbolism. Realist writers wanted to describe man and the society clearly and directly, avoiding ornamentation. This school has at times suffered from some considerable weakness—lack of imagination. Everything is presented so directly and directly that there is little to delight or excite the reader's intellect. As for symbolism, it was prevailing.
in France where they had Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867),
Jules Laforgue (1860-1887), Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) and
Stephane Mallarmé (1842-1898). The English poetry then
as a whole lacked vitality and intellectual vigor. Now
that classicism was gone for good; romanticism proved
itself untrue and realism lost its flavour, many young
writers sought for new literary values. With the help
of the knowledge of philosophy, psychology and painting
they made experiments in language, form, content and style
in order to reveal the veiled reality and the contemporary
consciousness. They are named modernists, who divide them-
selves into several schools. But all of them are character-
ised by an overthrow of artistic traditional values,
conventions and old platificies.

Against those intellectual and literary backgrounds
were born The Waste Land, one of the masterpieces in the
world literature.
Notes:

Chapter One

1. F. O. Matthiessen, "The Achievement of T. S. Eliot"
   Cox et al. (London: The Macmillan 1978) p. 118

2. Ibid., pp. 49-50

3. Michael H. Levenson, A Genealogy of Modernism (Cambridge:

4. Ibid., p. 168

   p. 29

6. 張為, Comprehensive Study Guide to The Waste Land
   (Hsin Ya Publishing Company 1975) p. 2

7. Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties American Writing in the
   Post-War Decade. (New York: The Free Press 1952) p. 278
CHAPTER TWO

ANALYSIS OF THE MULTIPLE VOICES IN THE WASTE LAND

1. The Voices in Part I "The Burial of Dead"

The poem starts off with the spring scene, which seems to be the protagonist's voice. Believing in the vegetation myths, the protagonist commences his year with spring - the season of the rebirth and the time for a renewal spiritual life. But spring is cruel for winter covers everything in the "forgetful snow" which thaws in the spring to expose everything. These lines remind the reader of the opening lines of Geoffrey Chaucer's (1340-1400) General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales:

When that April with his showers soreth
The drouth of March hath perced to the rote,
And bathed every vein in swich licro of which vertu engendred is the flour; ...... 1

In this setting the reader is carried into Marie's recollection of her childhood - a moment of exultation, which matches the theme of spring awakening:

And when were children, staying at the archduke's
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled...

(The Waste Land: Lines 13-14)²

With Marie's voice, the first paragraph comes to an end.

Like the first paragraph, the 2nd one (lines 19-42) can
be divided into 2 units. From lines 19-30, the
protagonist in the name of the enraged God presents a
waste land:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this scraggly rubbish? Son of man,
You can't say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beat (lines
19-22)

This scene bears a striking contrast to the spring one,
which still breeds "likeos out of the dead land" (line 2)
though cruel. For these lines reference can be made to
the prophetic books of The Old Testament:

And he said unto me, Son of man, I send thee
to the children of Israel to a rebellious nation
that hath rebelled against me; they
and their fathers have transgressed against me,
even unto this very day.³

In this desolate world, people suffers inertia and can't
accept love;

... I could not

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither

living nor dead, and I know nothing (lines 38-40)

This is the hyacinth girl's voice in ecstasy. In between these
2 units are inserted four lines from Wagner's Tristan und
Isolde, the first of a number of direct quotations which
"dot" throughout the poem.

The third paragraph (lines 43-59) is relatively simple
for there is one sole voice--Madame Sonostris's. Madame
Sonostris is an important character in the poem: she
prophesies rightly the destiny of the other characters in
the waste land except "the Hanged man" (lines 54) thus
providing propitious links between Part I and the other parts
of the poem. Her name itself sounds like a cheap imitation
of some Egyptian deity and the Tarot pack of cards, according
to Jessop Weston, had played an essential part on the most

crucial fertility rites of ancient Egypt.

The last paragraph (11. 60-76) seems to be again the
protagonist's speaking. But one cannot take it for granted.
In addition there are indirect quotations from Alighieri
Dante's (1265-1321) Inferno:
Degree papers are in the “Xiamen University Electronic Theses and Dissertations Database”. Full texts are available in the following ways:

1. If your library is a CALIS member libraries, please log on http://etd.calis.edu.cn/ and submit requests online, or consult the interlibrary loan department in your library.
2. For users of non-CALIS member libraries, please mail to etd@xmu.edu.cn for delivery details.