

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

August 2013 Vol. 4 Issue IV

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An Exploration of Man's Search for God: A Postmodern Analysis of *Ash-Wednesday*

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The Modernist movement gradually lost the eminence of the 1920s as a result of the political and economic crisis of the 1930s. Chronologically Postmodernism laid its footprints in various fields of study like literature, music, arts, cinema, fashion, communication, and technology. Critics consider Postmodernism as a Janus faced ideology—partly a continuation of and partly a deviation from Modernism. “Ash-Wednesday”, the first long poem of T.S. Eliot after his conversion to Anglicism in 1927, explores the experience of a man in search of God. Published in 1930 “Ash-Wednesday” is considered as one of the popular Modernist poem of Eliot. The present paper focuses on the Postmodernist features like intertextuality, allusion, self-consciousness, juxtaposition, ambiguity, use of mini narratives instead of grand narratives, discontinuity, and inability to face the real world. In a nut shell, this study critically examines “Ash-Wednesday” as a Postmodern poem replete with the above mentioned Postmodern characteristics.

Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot, the iconic figure of the 20th century, holds a distinguished position in the history of English Literature for his best known poems like “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, “Gerontion”, *The Waste Land*, “The Hollow Men”, “Ash-Wednesday”, and *Four Quartets*. Born in St. Louis (America) in the year 1888, Eliot had an intense love for the Anglo-Saxon culture and he always wanted to return to the epicentre of it. Finally, he started living in England from 1914. The World War I and the Modernist movement had a strong effect upon the literary scene. Eliot was mentored by Ezra Pound, one of the prominent leaders of Modernist Movement. His thoughts were shaped in the midst of the high tide of Modernism. Being one of the high priests of Modernism, Eliot's poems reveal the traits of Postmodernism. Being the first long poem of T.S. Eliot after his conversion to Anglicism in 1927, “Ash-Wednesday” explores the experience of a man in search of God. Published in 1930, “Ash- Wednesday” is considered as one of the celebrated works of Eliot, which displays the traits of Modernism.

One of the significant features of Modernism is the use of images. Image is a device used in Modernism. Eliot uses images in the poem “Ash-Wednesday” to express the predicament of man—his humane feelings, his genuine effort to reach God. Eliot replaces the image of an aged eagle by lark in line 6 which continues till line 34 to suggest the failure of poetic vigour and impotency, melancholy and futility of wings. The recurrent image of “wings” in the poem gives

an indication of desiccation of both carnal and spiritual wills as the wings beat the air which is “smaller and dryer than the will”(I.37). This highlights a conflict between the sensual and spiritual will which makes the poetic persona captive (because of carnal will) on one hand and free to serve God (because of spiritual will) on the other hand. In the poem “Ash-Wednesday”, there is a reference of “desert in the garden the garden in the desert” (V.182). This line suggests spiritual aridity of the self whereas the paradox of the garden in the desert reminds us of Isaiah xxxv, 1-2. It is prophesied that God’s grace can make the desert fertile. So there lies an image of spiritual renewal; the conflict between doubt and belief is focused through line 182 of the poem. Modern civilization is complex and its complexity is revealed through images, symbols, and references mentioned in the poem. Not only these; other elements of Modernism like dislocation of grammar, distortion of forms, and pastiche are also found in Eliot’s poetry.

Modernism can be explained with the metaphor of trunk and branch of a tree. In other words, we can say that Modernism is hierarchical, organized and centralized. The high stature of Modernism diminishes with the political and economic crisis of the 1930s. Chronologically Postmodernism made its mark in different fields of study. Literature, music, film, fashion, and technology got their new dimensions in the era of Postmodernism.

Characteristics of Postmodernism

Postmodern elements like intertextuality, allusion, self-consciousness, juxtaposition, ambiguity, use of mini narratives, discontinuity, and inability to face reality are found in Postmodern art. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the concept of Postmodernism can be explained with the idea of rhizome. Rhizomes flow in various directions and thereby constitutes network of multiplicities (Woods 32). The concept of Postmodernism is dispersed, disjoint, and de-centered in nature. It is partly a continuation of and partly repudiation from Modernism. Eliot, one of the high priests of Modernism, also exhibits prominently the features of Postmodernism in his poems. This section gives a detailed analysis of the above mentioned Postmodern attributes in Eliot’s poem “Ash-Wednesday”.

One of the popular works of T. S. Eliot as it is, “Ash-Wednesday” also displays some of the major aspects of Postmodernism. One of the significant characteristics of Postmodernism is the use of intertextuality. Julia Kristeva had coined a term named as “intertextuality”. Each and every text is an intertextual adaptation of other texts which opens up a new horizon. It is an umbrella term which includes the echoing of a text into another. Many critics opine that “intertextuality” is considered as the new name for the literary terms like allusion and reference. It cannot be confined to either of those above mentioned literary terms (Nasi 4-8). Every text is a mosaic of past citations. In the poem “Ash-Wednesday” the readers can notice the echoes of Dante, Shakespeare, the Bible, and the Anglican liturgy. “Ash Wednesday” comprises six fragments or sections. The poem has a base of Dante’s *Purgatorio* revealing the speaker’s intense urge for salvation. The opening line of the first section of the poem is a variation of the opening line of “Ballata written in exile at Saranza” written by Guido Cavalcanti. Eliot also refers to Shakespeare’s Sonnet xxix with a little variation to focus on the themes of introspection, solitariness and despair in “Ash-Wednesday”. Cavalcanti and Shakespeare find solace in earthly love whereas Eliot deviates from them thereby emphasizing on spiritual vision of love. He makes an intertextual adaptation of Dante’s *Vita Nuova* in the second section of the poem. The second section of the poem is an adaptation of Dante’s first meeting with Beatrice after nine years. The speaker of the poem drives away his old self in order to attain spiritual rebirth through the

mediation of the Lady who corresponds to Beatrice (indirect reference to Mary). Eliot again in the fourth section provides a beautiful description of Beatrice in *Purgatorio* xxx, 33. He makes use of other texts in his poem “Ash-Wednesday” to reveal the journey of the speaker from the state of spiritual barrenness to hope for salvation.

Another prominent feature of Postmodernism is the use of allusion. Eliot makes use of allusions in his poem “Ash-Wednesday”. He alludes to Shakespeare’s Sonnet xxix, “Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope” (Jain 216) with a little variation. Eliot makes use of the term “gift” in line 4 in the poem “Ash-Wednesday” instead of the term “art” in Shakespeare’s Sonnet xxix. The poet describes his discontented mental state through “Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope” (I.4) of the poem. He is envious of others who are more fortunate than him because he thinks that he never receives Fortune’s grace. Suddenly all his discontentment turns into joy, merriment, and triumph when the memories of sweet love of his beloved come to his mind. The themes of solitariness and despair are focused both in Shakespeare’s Sonnet and Eliot’s “Ash-Wednesday”. Shakespeare finds peace and solace in earthly love whereas Eliot turns towards a vision of spiritual love. Through this allusion Eliot also tries to speak about his loss of poetic inspiration. The opening lines of the second section of “Ash-Wednesday” allude to the *Purgatorio*, Grimm’s fairy tale “The Juniper Tree,” and “The Singing Bone,” the Book of Ezekiel. The reference to the “three white leopards” in line 42 of the poem is an allusion to Dante’s *Purgatorio*. The white leopards mentioned in the poem “Ash-Wednesday” symbolizes the agents of purgation. These three white leopards purge the sins of the pilgrims by devouring the lust and appetite of their selves. These leopards sat under the juniper trees which produce blue berries—symbolizes Mary as white and blue are the colours of Mary (Chaffin,10) The reference of “juniper-tree” in line 42 of the poem is also an allusion to Grimm’s fairy tale, “The Juniper Tree”. The juniper tree can be interpreted as the symbol of rebirth and renewal of life and strength. In the second section of the poem, “Ash-Wednesday” Eliot alludes to Ezekiel xxxvii, 1-4 where Ezekiel had a vision of the valley of bones. It reminds us of God’s prediction of the spiritual regeneration of the Israelites: “there were very many in the open valley; and lo, they were very dry. And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. Again he said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord” (Jain 220). The dry bones are the dismembered remnants of the old self. Another allusion to Ezekiel xxxvii, 8-10 is used in the poem:

Thus devoted, concentrated in purpose. And God said

Prophecy to the wind, to the wind only for only

The wind will listen... (II.62-64)

The bones were accumulated and covered with flesh but there was no breath in them. God commanded Ezekiel, Son of man to provide life to the dry bones. According to God’s commands, Ezekiel prophesied the wind to give breath to the dry bones and finally they were made alive. The ultimate stanza of the second section of the poem “Ash-Wednesday” focuses on the allusion to Ezekiel:

Under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and shining

We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other,

Under a tree in the cool of the day, with the blessing of the sand,
Forgetting themselves and each other, united (II.89-92)

The above mentioned lines allude to Ezekiel xxxvii, 11-12 which reveals Ezekiel's vision of the valley of bones. They lose their hope of resurrection as their bones are dried and cut off into pieces. Then Ezekiel makes a prophesy that God will resurrect the bones and bring the people to the promised land of Israel. Finally, God instructs Ezekiel to divide the promised land of Israel "by lot" (94) for their inheritance. Again He instructs Ezekiel to reunite North Israel and Judah. In the poem, Eliot mentions about the inner terrain of the spirit where division or unity does not matter. In the third section of the poem the readers can observe an allusion to the old man of St. Paul:

Damp, jagged, like an old man's mouth driveling, beyond repair,
Or the toothed gullet of an aged shark. (III.105-106)

The lines signify the old and unregenerate life of sin. It also reminds us of the image of an aged eagle in line 6 mentioned in the poem "Ash-Wednesday".

Postmodern art reflects self-consciousness in it. The poem "Ash-Wednesday" exemplifies the above mentioned aspect of Postmodernism in it. Manju Jain in *A Critical Reading of the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* comments that the strategy of *dédoublement* and images of dismemberment and disintegration are used in the poem "Ash-Wednesday" to indicate the struggle for rejection of old secular self and initiate a movement towards belief (213). In the beginning of the third section of the poem "Ash-Wednesday", Eliot focuses on the scene of a stair of a dark medieval tower:

At the first turning of the second stair
I turned and saw below
The same shape twisted on the banister
Under the vapour into the fetid air
Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears
The deceitful face of hope and of despair. (III.96-101)

It reminds us of Lancelot Andrewes' sermon "Of Repentance". Andrewes describes repentance as a kind of circle which consists of two turnings—first, a turn where we look forward to God and then comes the second turn where we look back to our sins. In his sermon of 1619, Andrewes has strong urge for conversion but he warns "the divell to hinder us from true turning, turnes himselfe into all shapes" (qtd. in Jain 223). This suggests a split self. In the third section of the poem "Ash-Wednesday", Eliot shows the split self through the allusion of old man of St Paul.

Postmodern art uses a device named juxtaposition. It includes collage, montage, contrast between grand past and trivial present. The second section of the poem "Ash-Wednesday"

focuses on the “white leopards” (II.42). Eliot makes a contrast between the white leopards of the poem and the spotted leopards of Dante. The spotted leopards of Dante represents fraud in canto i of *The Inferno* whereas Eliot’s white leopards are the divine agents of purgation of the pilgrims, the friends of the Lady. In the third section of the poem the readers can observe a contrast between grand past and trivial present:

Lord, I am not worthy
Lord, I am not worthy
but speak the word only. (III.117-119)

The above mentioned lines remind us of Matthew viii, 8 where centurion prayed to Christ for curing his paralyzed servant. He had a strong faith in Christ’s words as he thought that Christ’s words would be sufficient for his servant’s cure. centurion set an example of supreme faith in Christ’s words. The speaker of the poem “Ash-Wednesday” reaches the top of the three stairs and utters a prayer to God. He is so spiritually arid that he confesses his unworthiness to God. It suggests that he has not yet attained the faith of the centurion as the last words of centurion were omitted in the third section of the poem. A fervent appeal is made to God by centurion for his paralyzed servant. Though the protagonist professes his faith; he does not have a full belief in it. Here lies a contrast between centurion, a figure of the ancient times and the speaker of the present times. In the second section of the poem, “Ash-Wednesday” Eliot speaks about a Lady. She possesses the image of goodness, loveliness, and she honours the virgin in meditation as mentioned in the poem:

Because of the goodness of this Lady
And because of her loveliness, and because
She honours the Virgin in meditation, (II.49-51)

The Lady represents religious devotion and faith. Here Eliot makes a contrast between the Lady and the speaker of the poem who tries to acquire the traits of the Lady but fails to attain those attributes.

Ambiguity is another aspect of Postmodernism. The readers can observe ambiguity in the poem “Ash-Wednesday”. Eliot makes use of ambiguous words in the second section of the poem:

“We shine with brightness. And I who am here dissembled” (II.52)

Eliot uses the word “dissembled” in line 52 which has various interpretations. It can be interpreted as dismembered or disassembled; disguised by a false appearance; and ignored or unnoticed. The possible interpretations are not inconsistent with each other. In the fourth section of the poem Eliot makes use of ambiguous liturgical fragment:

And after this our exile. (IV.148)

The above mentioned line suggests that life is an exile which has been vouchsafed to the speaker and the speaker has been exiled from the divine vision.

“Ash-Wednesday” is often considered one of the epitomes of Modernist poetry, but if we analyse it from the perspective of Postmodernism, we can term it as a “Janus.” Janus is the Roman God of gates and doors, represented with a double-faced head, each looking into opposite directions. Postmodernism is a Janus-faced ideology. It looks into past and future as well. Jean Francois Lyotard, one of the Postmodern critics, thinks that there has been demise of “Grand narratives” or an “incredulity towards metanarratives,” (qtd. In Woods 20) and there is an emergence of micro narratives or mini narratives. In the Postmodern world, men have their own stories, own narratives (mini narratives or micro narratives); and these are focused in the entire poem. In the poem “Ash-Wednesday” the readers can observe that the grand narrative is replaced by the mini narratives of the speaker. The poetic persona of the poem “Ash-Wednesday” speaks about his spiritual dryness. His spiritual aridity makes him incapable of bearing the sufferings of Lent. So he does not hope to turn to God. Theodore Morrison in his article “Ash Wednesday: A Religious History” comments that the speaker of the poem is even unresponsive to an impulse like envy. He has to struggle to regain this lost impulse but he doesn’t. There is an indication of triumph of the flesh over spirit in line 5 of the poem where the speaker admits that “I no longer strive to strive towards such things” (I.5). This made him ignore the Supreme Power who created the speaker’s existence in this earth. The protagonist does not even hope to know the “infirm glory of the positive hour,” that is his death. The inabilities of the present generation are exhibited by the mini narrative of the speaker of “Ash-Wednesday”.

Ihab Hassan, one of the Postmodern critics, sums up the characteristics of Postmodernism either with “De” or “Di.” Discontinuity is one of them and Postmodern art favours the element of discontinuity. It involves an abrupt beginning or ending of a literary art. “Ash-Wednesday” has a startling beginning:

Because I do not hope to turn again (I.1)

There is no epigraph in the beginning of the poem. The speaker initiates the sentence with a conjunction, “because” which implies a decision propelled by a consideration of the past (Chaffin 6). It suggests a renunciation of hope—hope for the past diversions might threaten a new faith.

There is nothing real in the Postmodern world. The inhabitants of the Postmodern world are so unreal that they are unable to face the reality. They are always afraid to face the reality as they have disintegrated self. The readers can find that there are no living impulses in the speaker of the poem “Ash-Wednesday”. These result in loss of reality, death-in-life existence. In the article “Ash Wednesday: A Religious History” we can see the description of the world as a “blank space” without any attraction in it (Morrison 269). The speaker of the poem says:

Because I cannot drink

There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing

again (I.14-15)

The beautiful natural description of trees with flowers and springs with their gurgling sound symbolize fertility and God’s grace but the phrase “nothing again” (15) suggests mere emptiness. It indicates that the present generation people are so indifferent in their attitude that they prefer to live in an oblivious state, thereby escaping the real facts.

Conclusion

Though the poem “Ash-Wednesday”, a representative text of Modernism, is intertwined with both Modernist as well Postmodernist features, we find many prominent features of Postmodernism like intertextuality, allusion, self-consciousness, juxtaposition, ambiguity, demise of grand narratives, discontinuity, and the denizens’ inability to face the real world. The poem is also replete with a criss-cross pattern of Postmodern theories. If we critically analyze the texture of the poem from the perspective of Postmodernism, we can consider it as a postmodern poem.

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