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## **From T.S. Eliot to Martin Rowson: Doing the Detective in Different Voices in *The Waste Land***

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines the postmodern commentary on T.S. Eliot's complex modernist masterpiece, *The Waste Land* (1922) with its focus on the attributes of detective fiction. To address the above issue, it attempts to study Martin Rowson's parodic graphic novel *The Wasteland* (1990) in relation to Eliot's poem, aiming to analyze the subversive addressing of the modernist narrative through the varied features of detective fiction- ranging from the Holmesian to the hard-boiled- in both the texts. While Eliot's poem and Rowson's graphic novel have been studied as intertextual voices and as narratives of crime-solving, to date no analysis of the two have been made linking both in terms of a comparative study of the features of detective fiction as discerned. Yet such a study raises pertinent questions as the issues of detection and solution are carried forward from Eliot to Rowson and stand out, in the process, as an important tool of studying parody as "opening the text up, rather than closing it down" (Hutcheon 127) thereby re-examining meaning as situated across contexts.

**Keywords:** T.S. Eliot, Martin Rowson, detectives, whodunit, hard-boiled.

In response to a question<sup>1</sup> towards the later part of his career, the famous modernist poet and critic T.S. Eliot, when faced with the task of reviewing his life, wrote, "I now prefer claret to burgundy, and I prefer Inspector Maigret to Arsène Lupin" ("Autobiographical Note" 421). While Eliot's change of preference from the suave gentleman-criminal Lupin<sup>2</sup> to the everyday police detective Maigret<sup>3</sup> may seem to convey a personal inclination, it is rendered interesting if we choose to review the contemporary character of the genre, its *contemporariness*<sup>4</sup> once again highlighted interestingly in the light of a previous remark by Eliot himself, "I never read contemporary fiction – with one exception: the works of Simenon concerned with Inspecteur Maigret" ("Books of the Year" 576)<sup>5</sup>. The interest of Eliot the pioneering modernist in crime novels as part of contemporary literary fiction reflects his own

concern with the various disruptions which manifested themselves in the growing sphere of twentieth-century society and culture – a marked feature, in turn, of crime fiction and its reading and mirroring of the society of the period.

As a literary genre, crime fiction of the twentieth century, acclaimed critically as the Golden Age of the whodunit<sup>6</sup>, reached the pinnacle of popularity in the same period as literary modernism which addressed the loss of certainty and centre and disruption of social order – one which the former tried, interestingly, to redress and put back together. The simultaneous progress of both can be traced in the similarity in dates of publication of significant texts; the year of Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), for example, marks the debut of Agatha Christie as a novelist with *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* which introduces the detective Hercule Poirot, and *The Hollow Men* (1925), another significant poem by Eliot, is published on the same year as Christie's *The Murder at the Vicarage* featuring the first appearance of yet another important detective of the period, Miss Jane Marple of St Mary Mead. Like the concerned modernist<sup>7</sup>, the detectives of the period, amateur as well as professional individuals, are involved in seeking out a possible cause for an 'ailment' which struck the setting and caused a disruption of order and stability – a concern which maps distinctly the investigative strain in respective texts characteristic of both the genres.

Embodying in its 434 lines the trauma of a society marked by degeneration, decay and infertility, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* has emerged as the singular most mysterious modernist conception which has continued to baffle readers and critics alike. Popular perceptions of the poem have made it almost synonymous with 'a heap of broken images', a bricolage of allusions to and across cultures and texts coupled with a disjointed, open-ended narrative where Eliot attempts to seek a cure for the spiritual ailment of his generation. In this act of seeking, Eliot the artist stands out as the sleuth attempting to deduce the truth by uncovering the fragmented facts as presented by the society throughout the narrative; while he places the concern of investigation of the poem at the heart of fertility myths, the narrative, as Claire Weaver points out, is explored through the eyes of figures who may well be called detectives in that they "make their predictions by synthesizing a collection of fragments the same way that a detective synthesizes a series of clues to reach his or her own truth" (10): the preface to the poem cites Cumaean Sibyl, the ancient Greek prophetess known for telling the future by analyzing scattered leaves; in "The Burial of the Dead", Madame Sosostris, the "famous clairvoyant", predicts the future by reading tarot cards, and her remark, "I do not find/The Hanged Man" (Eliot 43, 54-55) resembles suggestively the thinking aloud of a possible clue to a murder

mystery; in “The Fire Sermon”, the prophet Tiresias, exhibits the ability to predict the future by examining the scene of the typist’s apartment, in the vein of Sherlock Holmes, a similarly distanced, experienced demigod of an English detective who can deduce by observing scenes and objects. Moreover, the detectives as deployed are concerned primarily with the idea of death- a cause of concern for Eliot himself in relation to the spiritual status of the living-dead society he wishes to investigate. As Weaver observes:

By using detectives who are associated with investigations of death itself, Eliot implies that death is, in fact, the mystery he wishes to solve. His realization of just how many death has “undone” leads him on a quest to find some kind of meaning, some kind of redemption in mortality (*Waste Land* 63). He “[shores]” up the “fragments” of his poem in the hopes of creating a narrative that will resolve the death and destruction of WWI the same way that a detective’s narrative resolves the death and destruction of murder (*Waste Land* 431). (10-11)

Eliot’s trail, however, goes cold on account of its own shortcomings; the anxiety and doubt stemming from ending up connecting “Nothing with nothing” (Eliot 302) – namely distinguishing between clues and red herrings – and the alienated states of the detectives. As the detectives – the bottled Sybil, the fraudulent Madame Sosostriis and the all-knowing and hence aloof Tiresias – stand alienated from the world, they seem unable to connect it with true meaning – a fact which increasingly disjoints the detective narrative of the poem ultimately articulating the central fear of lack of resolution. The detective’s doubt in Eliot, a chief aspect of the early stage of his poetic career, renders the narrative significantly open-ended, halting at clouds and thunder before any certainty of replenishing rain is delivered; the inability of the detectives “to restore any level of justice or clarity to society” (Weaver 15) foils the attempt of the narrative to “recover, or return to, a previous period characterized by stability and order” (Scaggs 47), causing an inevitable failure of Eliot’s investigation.

Significantly, it is this very insufficiency of the whodunit-like concern of Eliot and his detectives deployed in *The Waste Land* that points further towards the possibilities offered in the taking of yet another path – the one taken, when it comes to crime fiction, by the hard-boiled mode. A distinctly American sub-genre, the hard-boiled mode of crime fiction appeared in American pulp magazines of the early decades of the twentieth century, developing most notably with the publication of the hard-boiled stories by Erle Stanley Gardner, Dashiell Hammett, Raoul Whitfield and Raymond Chandler among others in the Black Mask Magazine

from 1923 onwards<sup>8</sup>. Featuring some of the most famous detectives such as Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Hammett's Sam Spade, the hard-boiled stories revolve around a fierce, individual private detective – the 'private eye' hero – who depends primarily on himself amidst a degenerate society and the 'mean streets' of America characterized by lawlessness and failure of moral order, and betrays little or no conventionally moral compass himself, having chiefly the understanding of the necessary course of action to rely on as he goes about it through relentless pursuits and actions which are, more often than not, violent and ruthless. In their ideological mapping, the hard-boiled stories reveal the 'tough-guy detective', in his non-association and unsullied action, as a descendant of the American frontier hero, his acts of cutting across the ruthless and villainous society and figures in the settings resembling, as Bethany Ogdon asserts, the frontier hero's vanquishing of the creatures of the forest – animal as well as human – and riding into corrupt frontier outposts to restore moral order (72). As against the mean streets and urban decay signifying failure of order and stability, his "action-oriented code of honor enables him to act in a violent world without losing his moral purity and force...his unsullied isolation and failure [maintaining] the purity of his stance as a man of honor in a false society" (Cawelti 159) thereby characterizing a new ideology – the 'hard-boiled' one – of decidedly individual action and surveillance as the new 'code of honor' vis-à-vis chaos, moral degeneration and lawlessness as embodied by society.

Martin Rowson in *The Wasteland* (1990), therefore, takes up as cause what Eliot left in his poem as consequence. His parodic graphic novel resituates the poem in the light of hard-boiled crime fiction, placing P.I. (the hard-boiled 'private eye') Chris Marlowe at the heart of the investigation. Marlowe, looking for the killers of his apparently dead partner Miles Fisher, finds himself caught in a web of murder, deception and conspiracy, at the heart of which lies the quest for the Holy Grail – the similarly significant factor in the quest for fertility and replenishment in Eliot's poem. Crucial to this adaptation is the nature of atmosphere common to both; as Scaggs points out,

What is significant about the fiction of Hammett, Chandler, and Ross Macdonald is that the urban environment they depict is similar to that of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) [...] and his depiction of the 'Unreal City' of modern existence clearly parallels the 'unreality' of Chandler's Los Angeles and Hammett's San Francisco, which are characterized by imitation, artifice, insubstantiality, fakery, and facades. (70-71)

Rowson's recontextualization of *The Waste Land* here thus signifies a more meaningful relating of the poem to its own inherent affinity to the hard-boiled mode. In parodically addressing Eliot's poem, Rowson turns Eliot and Ezra Pound, parties to "the first plot against the literary establishment for over a hundred years", (Hough 4) as the perpetrators whose complexities are responsible for the mystery and the series of unfortunate events in the story to begin with. The complexity and allusiveness of Eliot in *The Waste Land* as well as throughout his poetic career stand out as sites of not critical but criminal struggle: the Fishers commit multiple murders, the dubious Madame Sesostris double-times Marlowe, and the corrupt policemen, the cigar-smoking Bleistein and the Baedeker-bearing Burbank, stand in the way of his investigation and plan to jeopardise him unless he does their bid. At the same time, the hard-boiled mode stands significant in resolving the same crisis: Marlowe, with the "two voices" of the hard-boiled detective (Scaggs 61), makes clear the cynical commentary on the complexity of the situation he is drawn in as well as his resolve to end this all the same; he cares little for clues and other illusory recurrences throughout the story and fulfills his quest, ending the mystery that had so chaotically opened up – he fails not to *do the police in different voices*<sup>9</sup>, emerging victorious, as a result in resolving the chaotic narrative. He embodies, as Rowson himself asserts, "a stab at redemption in a fallen world" (70), fulfilling the quest for the Holy Grail, which he gives away indifferently to the Countess Larisch, who drinks from it; his partial success as a hard-boiled detective thus seems to emphasize what Scaggs asserts as the temporary nature of victory against the crime and corruption of the modern city (63) – the city where death undoes so many – thereby achieving a suggestive completion and commentary with respect to Eliot's quest by re-investigating the narrative.

Rowson's graphic novel thus complements Eliot's poem through the re-addressed form and focus of the detective narrative. The parody which Rowson delivers is not merely a "ridiculing imitation" (Hutcheon 26) but one more distinctly relevant in bringing out "a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic to a world of significance external to itself" (22) – one that is elucidated and emancipated in terms of interrogating the processes and practices of investigation. The comparative study of the forms and features of detective fiction underlining both the texts, therefore, stand significant in the context of rethinking meaning as embedded and fulfilled across texts common to the practice of postmodernism.

**Notes:**

1. Questionnaire for the *Harvard Class of 1910 Fiftieth Anniversary Report*. See *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot*, Vol. 8, 419-22.

2. Arsène Lupin is a fictional suave gentleman-criminal, the hero of popular detective novels by the French author Maurice Leblanc.

3. Inspector Jules Maigret is a fictional police detective, the hero of popular police procedural novels and stories by the Belgian author Georges Simenon.

4. Italics mine, for emphasis.

5. “Books of the Year Chosen by Eminent Contemporaries”, *The Sunday Times*, 24 Dec. 1950. Eliot here mentions the most recent Maigret publication of the time, *L'amie de Madame Maigret* (*Madame Maigret's Friend*, 1949). See *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot*, Vol. 7, 576-77.

6. The whodunit was a sub-genre of crime fiction which pivoted on the question of “Who committed the murder?” (“Who done it?”) and laid emphasis on the uncovering the identity of the murderer through clues vis-à-vis ‘red herrings’ or bluffs. Governed by a set of skilful conventions, the whodunit was popularized greatly in the Golden Age (the years between the two world wars) by authors such as Margery Allingham, Dorothy L. Sayers and Ngaio Marsh, besides Agatha Christie herself. See entry on ‘whodunit’ in *The Oxford Companion to Crime & Mystery Writing* (1999), Ed. Rosemary Herbert 495.

7. I refer here to James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914) and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) respectively which explore the paralysis, sterility and collapse in twentieth-century European society.

8. For a detailed insight into the *Black Mask Magazine* publication of hard-boiled detective fiction, see *The Black Mask Boys: Masters in the Hard-Boiled School of Detective Fiction* (1985), ed. William F. Nolan 19-34.

9. I refer here to the original title of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, namely *He Do the Police in Different Voices*. Italics mine for emphasis.

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