

ISSN: 0976-8165

IMPACT FACTOR 7.86

# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN  
ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL.14 ISSUE 5 OCTOBER 2023

14 Years of Open Access

Editor-in-Chief  
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor  
Dr. Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **Catatonia and Automatism in T.S. Eliot's Poetry**

**Adil Hussain**

Research Scholar,  
Department of English,  
University of Kashmir, North Campus.

**&**

**Dr Khursheed Ahmad Qazi**

Senior Associate Professor,  
University of Kashmir, North Campus.

**Article History:** Submitted-16/08/2023, Revised-12/10/2023, Accepted-13/10/2023, Published-31/10/2023.

### **Abstract:**

T.S. Eliot wrote in the context of a world waking to new and ugly realities of the war and the consequent crisis of a post-human world. Scofield's inquiry into Eliot's deployment of masks has provided enough scope for his poetry to be considered in terms of enactments. Scofield also examines Eliot's exploration of the tension between the fragmented identities/personas and the nostalgia and the "etch" of the characters to stick to a fixed past. Eliot's poetry escapes meaning, or is "destitute of meaning," to use his words. The disillusionment of poetry from the so-called "Romantic slumber" can be viewed as reaching its zenith in Eliot's style, diction and form. Moreover, Eliot's poetry can be admired differently when read in the context of the technological determinism of the present age. The present paper tries to highlight the elements of catatonia in his poetry and thus examines select poems to understand automatism, defragmentation, isolation, disillusionment and catatonia (the equivalent of which is found in present-day cyber fiction). It must be understood that catatonia and automatism form integral features of the digital dystopia. The poems, therefore, are studied through the lenses of digital humanism and digital dystopia. Digital dystopia accounts for the dystopic view of the digital marked by its excessive presence in society. A new understanding of Eliot's poetry emerges from such a study.

**Keywords:** Catatonia, automatism, digital dystopia, digital sublime, cyber fiction, War poetry.

### **Introduction**

T. S. Eliot's poetry marks the complete transition of an era, an end of the romantic notions of the world. This type of disillusionment with "the pretentious verse of the Romantic Poets," (Eliot) a Modernist dismissal of the Romantic tradition, is a reaction to the changing context of the production of art, especially poetry. This kind of dismissal is not found in Eliot alone; Ezra Pound would also dismiss William Wordsworth as a "silly old sheep". The same can be found in Joyce as well (Benziman). In the words of Yeats, the landscape of poetry has collapsed as 'things have fallen apart'. Yeats is the transitional figure who took it upon himself to "purify poetry". Ezra Pound would find a significant difference in the style and diction of twentieth-century poetry (the same he would call logopoeia). At the same time, Modernism chose a new metaphor for writing as it tried to import the hitherto "unpoetic" into poetry proper. For instance, archaic words are mixed up with formal, colloquial and technical jargon, giving poetry a new sense of depth. Modernism, at the same time, "produced chaotic and difficult writing... and became elitist" (Maxwell). According to Shakti Batra, the modern temper is characterized by a sense of insecurity and anxiety rather than confidence and surety (Batra 3). The poetry was now a matter of head rather than heart as in the late-Romantic sensuousness (lauded so much by F. R. Leavis on his *New Bearings in English Poetry* as the "living literature"); the evidence of this transition is Eliot's act of supplying footnotes to his *The Waste Land*. The war poetry was an ironic and scathing response to the erstwhile heroic poetry of patriotism with a common theme of soldiers dying for their country. The result was the depiction of the gruesome horrors of war in poems like "Dulce et decorum est," "They," "The General," "Futility," "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and the like. While these poems directly counter the heroic narratives of a romantic figure of the soldier going out to fight for his country, some describe, with subtlety and almost a sleight of hand, the aftermath of the war. Wilfred Owen famously proclaimed the function of "true Poets" to be truthful depictees of the "pity of War" even at the cost of poetry itself, as he proclaims to be "not concerned with Poetry" at all. While the war poets directly deal with a graphic representation of the gruesomeness of war, Eliot's poetry has little to no references to war in his significant poems like *The Waste Land*. Eliot, on the other hand, depicts the individual and the social trauma that the war caused. The destruction of the individual is seen both as the annihilation of the emotional self of the individual, the relational tension of couples and the loss of the social fabric that is already treated in Romantic poetry. The treatment in Eliot is ironic.

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many

I had not thought death had undone so many (“The Burial of the Dead,” *The Waste Land*)

Eliot’s poetry is rife with the themes of death, existential dread and catatonia. It is essential to consider the role of death imagery in Eliot’s poetry. In *The Waste Land*, for example, there are numerous references to death and decay, such as the famous line, “April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land” (1). Eliot uses the imagery to explore the idea that human life is fleeting and ultimately leads to death and decay. Moreover, it hints at long-term immortality at the end of death (immortality in the last instance). The imagery highlights the sense of disillusionment and despair that many people felt after World War I when the poem was composed.

Eliot’s High-brow art stands tall as the epitome of modernist literature. At the same time, it divides the art that tries to breach the boundaries between serious and popular art, also known as postmodernism (Cynthia Ozick 15). Eliot’s poetry deals with death and tries to resolve the aspects of resultant rebirth. *The Waste Land* runs on the binary of death/rebirth. Maud Bodkin studies this aspect of “Rebirth” as exemplified in the poem. As Bodkin mentions, “the Poem accomplishes – in Jung’s phrase – ‘a translation of the primordial image into the language of the present’, through its gathering into simultaneity of impression images from the remote past with incidents and phrases of the everyday present” (Bodkin 308). Rinku Nandi claims that the title of the first section, “The Burial of the Dead” of *The Waste Land* itself evokes the theme of death: “The epigraph brings the theme of death wish into sharp focus. The Cumaean Sybil longs for death because he is unable to bear a senile life. In the epigraph the Greek words are meant ‘I want to die’” (Nandi 61). This kind of death can be viewed as the death wish of the ‘Struldruggs’ (immortals) in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. The invocation of Chaucer’s “Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales* brings about the idea of rebirth after death as the “cruellest” phenomenon of nature. Death, as such, is rendered more desirable than the inevitable albeit unwanted rebirth. Death extends even to the non-human sphere, such as the “dead tree” and the “dry stone”. Eliot’s use of the memento mori device in the poem highlights the physical aspect of death (ibid. 63). Eliot highlights the same aspect of death in other poems.

The construction of the poem, or the “language game” that gives information, is fundamental to the meaning-making of the words in the poem (Zettel 160). The style is in sync with the thought of the poem, the objective correlative, so to speak. The line itself acts as the harbinger of death even before it goes on (and overflows into other lines) to deliver its message.

Anaesthesia should be viewed as a relevant technology in the poem, and the line is used to describe the patient (compared to the evening) in a comatose state. The effect of the line is that the "etherized patient" is shown to be dead while being alive, a temporary suspension of life which brings the resurrection in question and thereby does not absolve the 'dead' of what I would like to call "the crimes of dying and weakness". Stephen Spender said of these lines: "The combination of the clinical and the romantic connotations suggests the state of suspended consciousness of the 'patient' and the head of the dreamer full of the night sky and stars" (Spender qtd. in Perloff 22). Eliot's *The Waste Land* also functions as an extended death wish, as outlined in its epigraph. Fredric Jameson shines a light on this property of the poem:

Neither of these things can be said about ZARDOZ's other major thesis, namely the alleged relation between nature and morality, and the claim that human beings need death in order to realize some genuinely human existence. This thought, however doubtful its ideological connotations, can boast whatever degree of philosophical respectability you may desire, from Heidegger's "being-unto-death" to Robert Ardrey's assertion of man's killer instinct. Here we have a dramatization of that motto from the *Satyricon* which Eliot used as his motto for *The Waste Land*: "I once saw the Sybil of Cumae hanging in a bottle, and when the boys asked her, 'Sybil, what do you want?' she said, 'I want to die.'" (Jameson 6)

The theme of death wish suggests characters going through a state of suspension between life and death. The characters in the poem have been dissected to present to the readers the inner clockwork. As Shakti Batra suggests, the modern audience is interested in the psychological working of characters rather than a social dramatization of their situation (Batra). The problematization of death, pre-death and post-death occurs when such poems are read against the traditions of post-death resurrection and zombification in literature. Talking about Kurt Vonnegut's use of automation as an element of dystopia, Bimbirică and Ciugureanu suggest, "If 'a living thing in Ilium Works' (the automated area) moves, it will be "a curiosity'..." (20). Although, this new "industrial democracy" (ibid. 24) as a threat to jobs is entrenched in economics, the threat to individuals unable to understand the automation and their attempt to grapple with it is suggested in *Player Piano* and other novels. This type of automation startles and stupefies characters of social satires, such as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Catatonica and automation are staple tropes of apocalyptic horror fiction wherein the zombies act like brainless creatures with motives that drive them over the hills, under vehicles, through fires and whatnot. In Eliot's "Hollow Men," the reference to Dante's *Inferno*

in the epigraph itself foregrounds the futility of the repetitiveness of the characters' actions. Matthiessen aptly points at Eliot's project in his poems: "It would be glib to say that in 'The Waste Land' and 'The Hollow Men' Eliot wrote his Inferno and that since then his poems represent various stages of passing through a Purgatorio; still such a remark may possibly illuminate both his aims and achievement" (11). The poem can be read as a choral lamentation of the "Hollow men" who are a "paralyzed force" made of the stuff that dreams are made of since they lack any form and colour. Not only can the chorus do nothing on its own but refer to its catatonia; it often disturbingly points at its orgiastic ritual of wailing and inventing ruses such as disguising and mingling in. "Kurtz and Guy Fawkes both were 'lost violent souls,' not hollow men," as against the poem's speakers (Williamson 155). The "violent [soul]" of Guy Fawkes is hollowed out into an effigy by children, which is a make-believe ritual, in other words, a repetitive task assigned to children as a tradition. The reappearance of the eyes as "the perpetual star" also foregrounds the repetitiveness and renewal of their sufferings. A little later, the children can be seen making circles around the prickly pear endlessly as they (again) play the ritual of automation. The robotic interruptions to the Lord's prayer and the interruption that the Lord's prayers themselves cause in the progress of the epiphanies of the hollow men thwart both discourses. It feels like two robots talking simultaneously—a cacophony, an entropy. Finally, both voices try to merge into one, but the result is a disunifying truncation. "But the most devastating irony is formal: the extension of game ritual into liturgical form" (ibid. 159). The poem aims to be the mirror (not in the sense of Romantics) of the sufferings of the modern world. The automation caused by a post-World War industrial world finds its metaphor in "The Hollow Men," and is no less than a catatonic experience. Donald Heiney states, "The Hollow Men are the citizens of modern Western culture, synthetically stuffed with opinions, ideas, and faiths they cannot feel. The senselessness of the modern man's daily routine is indicated in the childish nursery rhyme which begins Section V" (Heiney and Harris 490).

In light of this context, it is interesting to consider how Eliot might have approached the concept of digital immortality. On the one hand, the idea of indefinitely preserving one's consciousness and memories might seem like a way to escape the inevitability of death and decay that is so central to Eliot's poetry. However, on the other hand, there are many ways in which the concept of digital immortality could be seen as echoing the themes of mortality and transience that Eliot explored in his work. One way to approach this question is to consider how digital immortality might be similar to or different from traditional forms of immortality, such as supplied and supported by religious ideas of an afterlife. In some ways, digital

immortality might be seen as an extension of these ideas –a way of preserving one's consciousness and memories beyond the physical body. However, there are also significant differences. For example, the idea of digital immortality relies on technology, which is subject to decay and obsolescence. In this sense, digital immortality might provide a double-edged metaphor for the reflection of the transience and impermanence of Eliot's poetry. Another way to approach this question is to consider the role of memory and nostalgia in Eliot's work. In *The Waste Land*, for example, there are numerous references to memories of the past, such as the lines, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" and "We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men / Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw." These references to the past are often tinged with a sense of loss and nostalgia, the speaker's longing for a time that is inaccessible.

This gives rise to the idea of digital immortality as a way of materializing memories: a way of preventing them from fading. However, this raises the question of whether such preservation is possible. Can memories indeed be preserved digitally, or are they subject to the same decay and obsolescence as physical objects? Moreover, even if memories can be preserved, is this the same as true immortality? After all, memories are always subject to interpretation and reinterpretation, and the act of remembering itself is constantly changing (Hallam and Hockey).

A post-apocalyptic sense of death is evoked in these lines: "We who were living are now dying". The dying are not dead as much as they want the reader to believe. Theirs is an attempt to register their existence in the face of, instead through, their death. The experience of a suspended living, a space between life and death, can be read as the rising of the dead as zombies with viruses-as-biological-weapons taking control of their minds and bodies, a *deus ex machina* in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic literature. The difference between them is traceable to the position of the voice in the narrative: the latter deals with the spectacle of the process of zombification, while the former tries to delve into the psyche and the effect of the zombification on the subjects who are forced into the limelight. The same experience of suspension of life, or lifelessness while living, can be studied against (and in connection with) digital immortality. Savin-Baden et al. differentiate between two types of digital grief: "one-way" grief, which they define as a passive one and "two-way" grief as dynamic and interactive. Savin-Badin and Burden define digital grief as different "practices that have developed through media and digital media and that have become acceptable norms and are the most common ways in which digital grief is likely to be encountered today" (ibid. 89). The interpretation of

after-death in terms of digital immortality in Eliot's poetry gives rise to the perspective of what Hallam and Hockey define as “restless death”. In this connection, the lines from *The Wasteland* (So many, / I had not thought death had undone so any) provide the act of reconnaissance and chaos at the spectacle of death. The questions posed by the characters of Eliot’s poetry is a harrowing quest of humanity since the advent of mechanical storage, the “shared brain” and the “online brain”. These characters stage a kind of immortality they are uneasy about. Therefore, they become appropriate subjects to study the effect of possible digital immortality on social structures and systems. Such a concern and related effects have been studied (Swan and Howard).

D. E. S. Maxwell aptly points out the predominance of spiritual death in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in terms of a “Dumbledoreian” suggestion of “Neither can live whilst the other survives”: “The lesson of *The Waste Land* is that man's worldly life is spiritual death, that there must be a renewal of asceticism before this can be remedied” (pp. 33-34). Looking at this over-explored theme regarding digital immortality leads to a new perspective on the poem.

### Works Cited:

Arnold, Michael, et al. *Death and Digital Media*. Routledge, 2017.

Batra, Shakti. *TS Eliot*. Sarup & Sons, 2001.

Benziman, Galia. “The Child’s Perspective: Hardy, Joyce, and the Redefinition of Childlike Romantic Sensibilities.” *Joyce Studies Annual*, 2013, pp. 151–71. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26288791>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2023.

Bimbirică, Mariana and Adina Ciugureanu. "The Dystopic Automation Nightmare in Vonnegut’s Player Piano". *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Studies and Environmental Communication* 1:19-31. Volume 10, Issue 1, 2021.

Bodkin, Maud. *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*. London OUP, 1963.

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays*. Courier Corporation, 1997.

Hallam, Elizabeth, and Jenny Hockey. *Death, Memory and Material Culture*. Routledge, 2020.

- Heiney, Donald, and Harris MacDonald. "Recent American Literature." *Barron's Educational Series*, Incorporated, 1958.
- Jameson, Fredrick. "History and the death wish: Zardoz as open form" *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 3, 1974, pp. 5-8.
- Matthiessen, F. O. *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot; An Essay on the Nature of Poetry*. OUP, 1958. PDF.
- Maxwell, Desmond Ernest Stewart. *The poetry of TS Eliot*. Routledge, 2015.
- Nandi, Rinku. "Archetypal approach to Eliot's "The Wasteland"." *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies* 1.1 (2016): 57-66.
- Perloff, Majorie. "Avant-Garde Eliot." *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics*, 7, 2002.
- Swan, Liz Stillwaggon, and Joshua Howard. "Digital immortality: Self or 0010110?." *International Journal of Machine Consciousness* 4.01 (2012): 245-256.
- Williamson, George. *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis*. United Kingdom, Syracuse University Press, 1998.