

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IMAGERIES AND DIMENSION OF TIME IN ELIOT'S "RHAPSODY ON A WINDY NIGHT"¹

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Abstract: It is undeniable that Rhapsody on A Windy Night is one of T.S. Eliot's most powerful poems. Its power lies in the use of elaborate and vivid imagery. Though to some critics, this poem seems far from pretty; however, it still implies its "uniqueness". And the uniqueness here is closely related to the relation between the imageries and the dimension of time used. Therefore, this study is intended to assess the kind of relationship between the elements and to what extend they signify the meaning of the poem.

Key words: visual imagery, auditory imagery, tactile imagery, dimension of time

INTRODUCTION

Imageries are very important for many poets, but for T.S. Eliot, they seem to be more special as he tries to excessively and eloquently

¹ The poem is cited from T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1935*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company Inc., 1936, pp. 27-30. Parts of it have been represented in a graduate students' discussion forum on T.S. Eliot with Dr. Jane Mallinson, in Leiden University, The Netherlands, December 2002.

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rely most of his poems on them.³ Imageries and dimension of time are complementary and essential in T.S. Eliot's "Rhapsody on A Windy Night". So, in this article, I am going to analyse the use of imagery in relation to the dimension of time of the poem. Initially, what needs to be done is to describe the complexity of imageries used by Eliot in the poem that consists of in total 81 lines.⁴ Then, identifying and determining the meaning and the dimension of time in relation to the imageries take place.

THE COMPLEXITY OF IMAGERIES

When using and developing imageries, Eliot's "Rhapsody on A Windy Night" which, begins with:

TWELVE o'clock.
Along the reaches of the street
Held in a lunar synthesis
(Eliot 1936:27, line 1-3)

This first description shown through lines 1-3, is a typical "visual imagery"; an image that derives from a visualization of the eyes of the speaker.⁵ In this case the speaker is somewhere in the street in the middle of the night. Then, in line 4 as shown below;

Whispering lunar incantations
(Eliot 1936:27, line 4)

³ Also read articles and essays entitled "Imagery and Symbolism of "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" on retrieved from <http://www.bookrags.com/essay-2006/6/6/51935/91044>; Debbie's article on Friday, April 21, 2006 entitled "The Perimeter of Poetry and Words: Rhapsody on a Windy Night" retrieved from lometa.blogspot.com/2006/04/rhapsody-on-windy-night.html - 103k

⁴ (see appendix for the full poem)

⁵ Parrini, Jay. *An Invitation to Poetry*, New Jersey: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic Inc., 1987, 15.. Jane Mallinson, in Leiden University, The Netherlands, December 2002.

It is a sort of "auditory imagery"; an image resulting from what a speaker can hear, which what Abrams and Greenbalt (2000) indicated as well. In addition, it can also be identified that the description of line 3 and line 4, which are "Held in a lunar synthesis,/ Whispering lunar incantations", is "a personification".⁶ The 'lunar' has been attributed to a particular human quality; 'whispering'. The word 'incantations' may also indicate as if the moon was assumed as a medicine man, a witch, or something alike.

Dissolve the floors of memory
And all its clear relations
Its divisions and precisions,
(Eliot 1936:27, line 5-7)

It is interesting to refer to lines 5 -7 because they exemplify the use of "tactile imagery"; a description based on a speaker's ability to feel, to touch, to taste, and to think of something.⁷ The speaker experiences an absurd occasion that wipes out all the very memories in his mind. The moonlight gives a significant impact to the speaker as described by the word 'dissolve'. The impact is very powerful so that the speaker could not even remember anything. Meanwhile, in lines 8 and 9 as pinpointed below;

Every street lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum
(Eliot 1936:27, line 8-9)

The imageries used here are visual as well as auditory. The former is visual and the latter is auditory. In addition, both lines indicate the use of simile in the poem. The comparative word 'like' suggests it. Here, the speaker perceives that the street lamp intensifies

⁶ M.H. Abrams, Gen.ed. and Stephen Greenblatt, Ass.ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. II, New York and London:Norton, 7th edn, 2000, 2936

⁷ Parrini, Jay. *An Invitation to Poetry*, New Jersey: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic Inc., 1987, 17

his dissolved memory to an inevitably worse condition as indicated in line 9. The following lines;

And through the spaces of the dark
Midnight shakes the memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium
(Eliot 1936:27, line 10-12)

Use both visual and tactile imageries. Line 10 “And through the spaces of the dark is visual. Line 11 “Midnight shakes the memory” is tactile, and line 12 “As a madman shakes a dead geranium” is visual. Another figurative language, that is simile, also works in this part. The description that can be drawn is that the speaker's bad condition may be compared to the condition or description of insanity: 'A madman shakes a dead geranium' is an example of not only silly matter but also insane.

Both visual and auditory imageries are used in line 13 until 15. Line 13 “Half-past one” is visual whereas in the other two lines “The street lamp sputtered / The street lamp muttered,” the imageries are not only visual but also auditory. The description in lines 14 and 15 involves two activities of the speaker at the same time; seeing the lamp, and hearing the lamp which 'sputters' and 'mutters'. In this case, personification definitely takes place because the lamp is pictured as a human being.

In line 16 to 22, visual and auditory imageries still work, particularly with the use of quotation marks that point out the existence of auditory imagery. Not only do they refer to auditory imagery, but also to personification. In line 17 and 18 which are “Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door / Which opens on her like a grin.”, simile is used. There is also another simile in line 21 and 22 which are “And you see the corner of her eye / Twists like a crooked pin.” The door that opens is seen as a grin by the personified street lamp. The description of line 16 to line 22 is that the personified street lamp asks the speaker, who is still in the street, to see a woman

standing in hesitation before the door. The woman herself is a poor individual who is described as follows.

You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin."
(Eliot 1936:27, line 19-22)

In the remaining lines of this part, the imageries used here are visual and tactile. Line 23 which is "The memory throws up high and dry" and line 24 that is "A crowd of twisted things;" suggest that the description goes back to the condition of the speaker for a while. Afterward, the description moves on to the elaboration of what the 'twisted things' are. In this part, there are two fragmented memories that come across the speaker; the first is about a branch on a beach, and the second is about a spring in a factory yard. Line 25 which is "A twisted branch upon the beach" is a visual imagery whereas the next line that is "Eaten smooth and polished" is a tactile. Line 27 and 28 which are "As if the world gave up / The secret of its skeleton," are visual imageries. Line 30 that is "Stiff and white" is both tactile and visual. From line 31 up to 33, the imageries are visual but line 33, in particular, also contains a tactile imagery as represented by the word 'hard'.

Line 35 begins with "Half-past two," which is a visual imagery. Then, from line 35 until line 38, the imageries used are visual, auditory, and tactile. These lines also indicate the use of personification shown by the following quotation marks.

The street-lamp said,
"Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter,
Slips out its tongue
And devours a morsel of rancid butter."
(Eliot 1936:28, line 35-38)

The description of these lines is quite clear. The speaker is asked by the street lamp to remark the cat that is eating a slice of smelly butter in the ditch. This view is definitely quite unfavourable because there are some key words and phrase that constitute negative images. For instance, 'gutter' indicates a filthy place; 'slips out its tongue' and 'devour' have associations with animalistic behaviour; 'rancid butter' is not a nice thing to smell. Thus, the speaker gets these negative impressions by the time the view occurs.

The rest of the poem, starting from line 39 until line 47 suggests the use of visual imagery only. The description of this part goes back to one of the 'twisted' memories in the speaker's mind. The speaker may try to make a comparison or resemblance between the view of the cat devouring rancid butter and the speaker's memory of the child that his hand automatically keeps a toy for himself as shown in the following:

So the hand of the child, automatic,
Slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running
along the quay.
I could see nothing behind that child's eye.
(Eliot 1936:28, line 39-42)

In addition, this part also conveys the inability of the speaker to see any motives from the child's eye shown in line 42. The impression of this child's behaviour seems to be more neutral and simple.

Then, the memory of the speaker goes to the occasion concerned with 'eyes' as indicated in line 43 and 44 "I have seen eyes in the street / Trying to peer through limited shutters,". The impression that can be drawn from these lines is that the speaker seems to be a stranger to other people's eyes. The sense of caution and curiosity may be indicated by the phrase 'peer through limited shutters'. The last three lines of this part emerge from another different memory of the speaker.

And a crab one afternoon in a pool,
An old crab with barnacles on his back,
Gripped the end of a stick which I held him.
(Eliot 1936:28, line 46-48)

In these lines, the description is that the speaker wants to keep the crab out of the pool. The impression of this depiction may slightly be comical for the reader may perceive it as something rare but it happens to the speaker.

A visual imagery proceeds part four as shown in line 49 "Half-past three". Both visual and auditory imageries are applied in line 50 and 51 "The lamp sputtered, / The lamp muttered in the dark." From line 52 until line 64, personification takes place marked by the use of quotation marks. Besides visual and auditory imageries, these lines also involve tactile imagery. From "The lamp hummed:" to "*La lune ne garde aucune rancune,*" visual and auditory imageries can be found whereas from line 55 to line 60 there are mainly visual imageries shown as follows.

She winks a feeble eye,
She smiles into corners.
She smooth the hair of the grass.
The moon has lost her memory.
A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,
Her hand and twists a paper rose,
(Eliot 1936:29, line 55-60)

The next line which is "That smells of dust and eau de Cologne", tactile imagery takes place. Then, it is proceeded by visual imagery in line 62 "She is alone". In the remaining two lines of the personification in this part, which are "With all the old nocturnal smells" and "That cross and cross across her brain.", there lay tactile imageries.

The image that can be drawn from the lines within the quotation marks, which is line 52 to 64, is gloomy. The picturesque of the night

represented by the moon in “*La lune ne garde aucune rancune*” or “The moon harbours no ill-feelings” (Southam 1991:52) is suddenly interrupted by a description of a 'lifelessness' of a girl. The gloominess of the image can be pinpointed in line 55 “She winks a feeble eye,”, line 58 “The moon has lost her memory.”, line 59 “A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,”, line 61 and 62 “That smells of dust and eau de cologne, / She is alone”, and line 63 and 64 “With all the old nocturnal smells / That cross and cross across her brain.”. The relation between the moon and the girl is that the moon has lost her memory. It is not a good one. The reader of the poem may be perplexed by such a combination. Is the girl mad? What is she doing out there? Why? are questions that can be addressed to her. Yet, whatever she does and the reason she is there, the presentation of the girl in combination with the moon is to be seen as the speaker's individual and personal experience driven by the personified lamp.

The reminiscence comes
Of sunless dry geraniums
And dust in crevices,
Smells of chestnuts in the streets,
And female smells in the shuttered rooms,
And cigarettes in corridors
And cocktail smells in bars.
(Eliot 1936:29, line 65-71)

In this section, there come both visual and tactile imageries. Visual imagery works in all lines whereas tactile imagery exists only in the last four lines. Line 65 “The reminiscence comes” marks a shift from the external view to the internal view of the speaker. It is the time when the speaker gains back some fragmented memories. What are they? The answers lay from line 66 to 71. In these lines, the speaker does not only remember the objects but also the places. The image resulting from these lines varies because each line is a fragmented description as, for instance, shown in line 66 and 67 that may be about ageing and decay.

Part five begins with "The lamp said, / Four o'clock.". From this two lines onward, there are only visual and auditory imageries. They both work in each line. The image that can be gained from these lines is that the speaker suddenly has the ability to remember things as indicated by the following.

Here is the number on the door.
Memory!
You have the key,
(Eliot 1936:29, line 74-76)

The ability to remember things is referential to line 76 "You have the key.". In this case, the lamp functions as the agent of change for the speaker. It directs the speaker into a consciousness as shown in line 74 and 75 "Here is the number on the door. / Memory!". Line 77 to 80 provides further involvement of the lamp to regain the speaker's consciousness.

The little lamp spreads a ring on the stair.
Mount.
The bed is open; the tooth-brush hangs on the wall,
Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life."
(Eliot 1936:30, line 77-80)

The last two lines, particularly, has an image for the speaker to go on and encounter with daily life. The last line of the poem, which is line 81 "The last twist of the knife", gives an image that whatever the speaker has undergone, it has to be ended.

MEANING AND THE DIMENSION OF TIME

Before touching upon the function of dimension of time in constituting the meaning of the poem together with the imageries, it is necessary first to identify who the speaker is, it can be said that the speaker of this poem is a man. The very reason why it comes to such a conclusion is based on several lines. They indicate the tendency that the speaker is a man rather than a woman as shown below:

And female smells in shuttered rooms,
And cigarettes in corridors
And cocktail smells in bars.
(Eliot 1936:29, line 69-71)

The words “female”, “cigarettes”, and “bars” are culturally associated with man's world rather than a woman's. Should the speaker be a woman, these lines may be changed into some other words associated with her world. “Female smells” could become “male smells”; and “cigarettes” and “bars” can be anything. These indications do not mean that a woman in reality cannot talk about other women, go to the bar, and smoke some cigarettes. Although these are 'merely' fragmented memories, they imply which ones are deeply and impressively rooted in the speaker's mind.

Other indications can also be pinpointed in the use of female imageries in the poem. There are two images of women in the poem; first, an image of a woman who is described in line 16 up to 22; and second, a woman who is depicted in line 55 up to 64. The first woman is represented as a stranger to the speaker or vice versa whereas the second is described more in gloomy and phenomenal way to the speaker. Even though it cannot surely be revealed the very reason why T.S. Eliot has chosen and elaborated women in this poem, the use of these images strengthen the tendency of the poem to be seen from the point of view of a man.

The occasion of the poem primarily takes place in a city (somewhere); and the time is late evening. Although the city is imaginative and does not directly refer to any particular city, there are some indications why the event occurs there. The elaborate use of “street lamps” and the description of “the cat which flattens itself in the gutter,” constitute an image of an urban place, a city, which is crowded and dirty. “Along the reaches of the street” in which the lamps (“Every street lamp that I pass”) lay also refers to an urban place, a city where many lamps are placed to provide lightning. Nevertheless, there are also some memorable places in the speaker's

mind as the result of his attempts. "The beach", "the factory", "the quay", "the pool", "(chestnuts in) the streets", "shuttered rooms", "corridors", and "bars" are words indicating the fragmented places in the speaker's mind.

The poem talks about a man and his surroundings, so the theme is concerned with self-alienation. It is a self-alienation since the man has seen his modern surroundings as ugliness. He is basically unable to find the clear-cut of the ugliness, hopelessness, and gloominess placed before him and the memory of his own past. It is a reason why he can only remember things fragmented by the time an event occurs to him or seems to occur. It is the effect of the so-called "the predominance of ugliness in the physical environment" (Sienicka 1970:37).

Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" comprises a unique form. It basically does not consist of quatrains but it consists of a number of stanzas in free verse. There are 5 long stanzas in the poem, and they are all featured by the times. Almost each stanza begins with time-referring. Stanza one begins with "TWELVE o'clock."; stanza two begins with "Half-past one,."; stanza three begins with "Half-past two,."; stanza four is with "Half-past three,."; and stanza five is with "Four o'clock,.". The time-referring is the dimension of time in the poem. Not only does it point out at the time-sequence but also at the whole meaning of the poem. In this case, the dimension of time denotes human boundaries as one of the factors that creates such a mess in his surrounding. It seems like an excuse but that is the very point. The dimension of time is presented in order to pinpoint how human being is easily trapped in 'time' he creates and puts blame on it for his failure.

Each stanza implies anxiety which is generated and stimulated by the dimension of time. Whether or not the man is able to regain his awareness from this muddy and filthy world he lives in, would be the question he has to answer. When each stanza is characterised by

confronting direct events presented by the personified street lamps and the speaker's attempts to conform them with his memories, the dimension of time rolls by undisturbed. Yet, it is also the dimension of time that brings him step by step to gain his memory back. From stanza one up to stanza four, the reader may get the impression that it is the speaker himself that utters the time but in the last stanza it is the lamp that says, "Four o'clock,". This shift marks the gain of the speaker's consciousness through an object he personifies.

CONCLUSION

If the dimension of time is indeed significant to the meaning of the poem, the remaining question now is what is the relation of the use of the imageries in the poem and the dimension of time. There is of course no direct statement about it from Eliot but from the structure and the pattern of each stanza it can be deduced that the imageries are very important to the use of dimension of time since they provide events as examples or cases that can be elaborated as 'a story'. In other words, it is the imageries that construct and enhances the 'course' of the poem while the dimension of time frames them. Without the imageries and the dimension of time the "objective correlative" of "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" cannot be fully understood.

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