

**The Quest for Salvation
T.S. Eliot's " The Waste Land"
and Robert Lowell's Land of Unlikeness
A Comparative Study**

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Abstract:

This paper tackles a comparison between T.S.Eliot' " The Waste Land" and Robert Lowell's Land of Unlikeness. The choice made in this paper of a comparison between T.S. Eliot(1888-1965) and Robert Lowell(1917-1978) is based on the fact that though some critics paired the poets' names, there has been little scholarly interest in comparing Lowell's and Eliot's poetry. Norma Procopiow identified a particular area of comparative study between the two poets which has been virtually untouched by critics: " no one has examined such corollaries as Eliot's " The Waste Land" 1922, and Lowell's Land of Unlikeness 1944,". The choice is also based on the premise that both poets underwent the same experiences: and both were thus motivated by the same causes to transcend these experiences: namely, the sense of disorientation as a result of their puritanical background and the world wars. The paper thus attempts to define the motivating causes that led Eliot and Lowell to undertake their quest for salvation. From this is generated what is considered in this study to be the incompatibility yet, through the historical process, inevitability of the attempt to wed the spiritual with the material, i.e., the poet's attempt to move from disorientation to salvation, from doubt to certainty. The paper also



attempts to show how Eliot and Lowell began from the same point of departure but took divergent lines. It may be said that the cardinal difference between Eliot's and Lowell's poetry lies in that Eliot's poems manifest themselves into a philosophy of existence which crystallizes his gradual movement to Anglo-Catholicism through a mystical experience which leads to a sense of eternity. By contrast, Lowell's poetry reflects the philosophical struggle in him between doubt and certainty in relation to a religious Absolute; and so his poems manifest the state of neurosis from which he suffered.

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Both "The Waste Land" and Land of Unlikeness "are similar in that they express a quest for religious security,"² a quest prompted by the devastation of war. In "The Waste Land" (1922) and Land of Unlikeness (1944), war is seen as a prime cause of man's sense of loss. In "The Waste Land", the bar scene is a direct allusion to the First World War (1914-1918): "Lil's husband got demobbed", (l. 139). "he's been in the army four years...", (l.148). In this scene, the sterility of life after 1918, and the inability of man to find a spiritual justification for living are shown in that the main topic among women is abortion: "It's them pills I took, to bring it off..." (l. 159).

In the twenty one poems of Lowell's Land of Unlikeness "revelation and hallucination merge"³. The hallucination reveals a man trapped in life: the inferno of life, in "The Drunken Fisherman" denoted by the association between "dynamited brook," (l.34) and "stygian" water, a river in Hades, gloomy and infernal:

Wallowing in this sky,
I cast for fish that pleased my eye
(Truly Jehovah's bow suspends
No pots of gold to weight its ends);
Only the blood-mouthed rainbow trout
Rose to my bait. They flopped about



My canvas creel until the moth
Corrupted its unstable cloth

("The Drunken Fisherman" 1.1-8, L.U.)

It is this hallucination that leads to revelation: "The Man-Fisher," (1.40), or Jesus Christ, is appealed to, suggested by the desire "to cast [his] hook/ out of this dynamited brook," (1.34").

... in spite of the speaker's own
uncertainties regarding his skill at
catching fish, his hope is that he
himself will be caught by the fisher
of men.⁴

The image of fish and fisherman is continued: "I will catch Christ with a greased worm", (1.37), introduces a mutual role enacted between Christ and the speaker: Christ will catch the speaker's soul through the speaker's catching him. the "greased worm" may be seen as an allusion to earthy sins, by which Christ is drawn to the speaker for the purpose of redemption. And so

... When the Prince of Darkness stalks
My blood stream to its Stygian term
On water the Man-Fisherman walks.

("The Drunken Fisherman", ll. 38-40, L.U.)

These lines suggest the Catholic belief that Christ will descend into Hell and free those imprisoned there. This open-close movement carries with it a sense of finality, as if the poet has at last reached truth. But other poems in the collection countervail the belief in God's mercy to sinners. "The Bomber" depicts God's wrath:



Bomber climb out on the roof
Where your goggled pilots mock,
With positive disproof
David's and Sibyl's bluff.
"Will God put back the clock
Or conjure an angel Host
When the freedoms police the world?"

("The Bomber", 11.1-7, L.U.)

The paradox in these lines is seen in that, although the bomber symbolizes God, its pilots (who represent the Allies) " mock David's and Sibyl's bluff". In other words, there is a dissociation between God and his flock. Thus the 'freedoms' who will 'police the world' are seen as having drifted away from Christianity. Therefore the question arises for the need of conjuring ' an angel Host', or putting ' back the clock'; that is a turn to Christianity.

In " The Boston Nativity", Lowell sees the disaster of humanity in the modern age as resulting from Original Sin thereby warranting Divine retribution. In the poem, original sin is seen from its historical perspective, where life in modern Boston is stripped of its spiritual meanings and the speaker listens ' to Unchristian carolings' as a result of the movement of Puritanism in history towards nationalism which led to the world wars.

The denizens of " The Waste Land " are also sinners but, paradoxically, they have lost their passion for sin. For example in the sex scene in " The Fire Sermon",

His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome indifference.



[He] bestows one final patronizing kiss,
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit...
She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
"Well now that's done: and I'm glad it is over."

(" The Fire Sermon", ll. 241-48, T.W.L.)

This scene reveals the retribution of the First World War: the lady and her lover are reduced to a state of death-in-life, that is, they are living in hell.

Lowell also sees war- in his case the Second World War- as a source of evil. In " The Eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1942", the western allies are not seen to be fighting for a religious cause against the Nazis:

Freedom and Eisenhower have won
Significant laurels where the Hun and Roman kneel
To lick the dust from Mars' boot heel.

(" The Eve of ... 1942", ll. 9-11, L.U)

The decline of spirituality in the modern age necessitates the reformulation of the spiritual values of humanity. In the case of Eliot's " The Waste Land":

The poem objectifies the hell and Purgatory from two points of view at once: first as a cosmic progress of constant failure and inadequacy in the scenes and episodes of the poem; and in the myth which informs it, as a directive on how to choose so as to transcend this disaster.⁵

On the other hand, Lowell, in Land of Unlikeness, presents two main ideas; the first is the unchristian character of the Allies' role in the Second

World War; the other is the casual connection between the doctrines of America's founders and the desolate condition, spiritual and material of the country in the thirties. Looking back, Lowell saw in the ideals and motives of his ancestors the same contradictions, the same denial of Christ they professed to believe in, that made his own world a land of unlikeness i.e., a place obliterating the image of divinity, a culture where the old metaphors that made created beings recall their creator, no longer operated.

In order to make these ideas clear, an individual analysis of each poem is required, and the comparisons will unfold when " The Waste Land" and Land of Unlikeness are set face to face rather than side by side.

In the first section of " The Waste Land" ' The Burial of the Dead' there is a state of death-in-life. " April is the cruelest month "(1.1), is an inversion of the mythical fertility rites; the spring rains " do not form part of a living cycle"⁶. The following lines, (11.8-18) which reflect" the chatter we hear in international holiday resorts"⁷ expresses the decadence of civilization before the First World War. This is followed by Madame Sesostris (11. 43-59) who shows how the present has debased its inheritance and devalued what was once the forces of life. This is followed by reference to the First World War: the allegorical Hell of the Waste Land which is described as the Unreal City.

In the first section of the poem, there are three ages of history; that of the ancient fertility cults, pre-World War I, and the war itself. Ostensibly, these ages are meant to focus on the death of modern man but the 'negative capability'^{*} becomes apparent in the inverted fertility cult. In other words "The Waste Land"

Is based on a very strong belief in



* The expression 'negative capability' was first used by John Keats in his reference to Shakespeare's plays, very briefly Keats meant that what is denied its existence on one plane of reality will make itself operative on another.

Original sin and the value of religion.
Eliot's 'voyage within' has taken him
as far as the negative side of religion:
it was almost inevitable that he should
proceed from this point to positive
religious belief.⁸

Therefore, what characterizes this fertility cult is spirituality, and the absence of this pivotal aspect asserts the very need for it. Hence the inverted fertility cult in the first lines of the poem also becomes its own antithesis, in the sense that the inversion presupposes the existence of its opposite, that is, the validity of the meaning behind the original fertility cult. This is substantiated by the fact that Madame Sesostris "devalues the inheritance of the past"⁹; and thus by negative capability the past is not diffused into the present, but made distinct from it: it is the materialistically plagued modern age that has failed to understand the spiritual heritage of the ancient world. Again, this is reinforced when Eliot draws on another age from history, which he fuses into the present, in the same part in which he refers to the First World War, "with a dead sound on the final stroke of nine" (1.67), suggesting a knell, we have the speaker addressing someone who presumably represents the average businessman:

The battle of Mylae, in the Punic Wars, "like World War One,... fought for economic reasons"¹⁰. Eliot, in fact, is picking out the cycles of history, pinpointing spirituality as leading to the stability of civilization, and materialism to its decline. This is shown in the following lines:



That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

(" The Burial of the Dead", ll.71-73, T.W.L.)

The speaker, in addressing Stetson points to the ultimate degeneration of the fertility ritual, where the dying god is something buried in a suburban garden. The condemnation of materialism as being destructive physically, morally and psychology and the negative capability inherent in such a condemnation explodes in the last line of the movement:

Oh keep the dog far hence, that's friend to men,
Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
You! Hypocrite lecturer! – mon- semble—mon frere!"

(" The Burial of the Dead", ll. 74-76, T.W.L.)

The same idea is repeated in the second section, " A Game of Chess". It opens with the picture of " a bored woman of leisure ... in an atmosphere where the ornaments, the perfumes, the sheer excess of objects stifles the senses"¹¹. The overall picture is the distinction between grandeur and futility. It evokes by an ironic contrast the splendour of Cleopatra; indeed, the first line is taken from Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra: "The [chair] she sat in, like a burnished throne" (1.77), at once becomes a satirical quip at modern grandeur and generates the negative capability by evoking the spiritual life-force of the great Queen.

What Eliot has done by the use of negative capability is to open the way for the spiritual quest. Its premise is " we don't know very much of the future

except that from generation to generation, the same things happen again and again"¹². Hence, Eliot's images contain ambiguities, not the viciously locked contradictions that lead to a vortex as in Lowell, but ambiguities which come out of one another, signifying a rebirth of spirituality from "The Waste Land", life growing out of death in the true fertility fashion. This, as we have seen, begins, in fact, from the first movement which is extended to "

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket
No relief.

("The Burial of the Dead" 11. 18-23, T.W.L.)

These lines contain "an ambivalent symbol, expressing both spiritual fertility and physical aridity and barrenness at the same time"¹³. It is maintained that the first may come out of the latter, dependent on an understanding and appreciation of spirituality. The shadow "striding behind you"(1.27), may be taken to mean the past, not the spiritual past which is the core of the matter as Eliot sees it, but the inverted past of the fertility rites and Cleopatra; and also the past is fused in the present for the striking similarities between them: Mylae, Eugendies, the Smyrna merchant, and others who embody the materialistic phases of civilization and their destructive effects. The distortion of the past in one case, and adhering to what is only materialistic in it on the other, leaves the past with no real substance for us; hence it is only a shadow. The "Shadow at evening rising to meet you"(1.28), may be taken to mean the future. That, too, is without substance for the simple reason that the past is without substance. The past without substance strides to meet us, the future

with no substance rises to meet us. These two words carry a force with them which shows them as living powers from which an inert humanity in its present condition cannot escape. The result is " a heap of broken images" (1.21), that is, the discontinuity of the experience of humanity in the sense that the spiritual values since time immemorial have been discarded. The "shadow of the red rock"(1.26), we are told categorically, is different from the others. On one level it is a haven from the "sun[that] beats"(1.22), yet the rock contains an ambivalence which is necessary for the regeneration of spirituality:" I will show you fear in a handful of dust"(1.30). this is obviously symbolic of death, but it is also symbolic of life. The rock has been interpreted as the resurrection of Christ: a reminder of the fertility cults which see that life is eternal only through death. In this Eliot links pre-Christian times to Christianity as part of the general scheme of things leading to universal truth. Spirituality, therefore, is born in a waste land; indeed, great religions appeared only in times of corruption and thrived, not in the cities, but in the deserts. Hence the wilderness we have here is at once a reflection of the barrenness of the ' unreal city' and the land which salvation may yet be found.

The quest for spirituality, which is no doubt deliberate, runs parallel to the forms of death in "The Waste Land" and hence the constant reference to the legend of the Fisher King and the Holy Grail. This quest confirms that through desolation spiritual revival is possible. The whole issue of spirituality and materialism presented in a form of mental confrontation explodes in " What the Thunder Said":

In "What the Thunder Said", the quest for salvation, freedom from



passion and rebirth and the restoration of vitality find poetic expression through two objective correlatives, that of the "Quest" mentioned in the Grail legends, and that of the incident of the journey of the disciples of Christ to Emmaus.¹⁴

This time, however, the issue of spirituality is given in purely Buddhist terms, though this is prepared for in "The Fire Sermon", in which spiritual Christianity and Buddhism merge when St. Augustine echoes the Oriental Buddha in a call for the renunciation of lust. In "What the Thunder Said" the confrontation between spirituality and disorientation is given by the commandment explicit in the three words, "Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata" (ll. 400-22). It is linked structurally to the Christian journey of the quest in the Journey to Emmaus, and the approach to the Chapel Perilous and comes after the apparent failure of the quest. With these words, "the fertilizing rains fall". The reason for this apparent failure of the quest is due to the absence of that humility which will lead to absolute self-surrender and Faith transcendent God. The injunction does not solve the problem of salvation: the lines that follow show Eliot's awareness of the forces of history represented by the Great War.

Contrary to this approach adopted in "The Waste Land", Lowell is caught in the religious-historical contradictions of past and present. In a reference to the Vortex, Hugh Staples sees that Land of Unlikeness is concerned with "the agony of a soul still hold captive by the world of the senses yet sufficiently aware of God to perceive the dark strangeness of the material world and the falsity of mortal existence pursued for its own sake!"¹⁵.

It is obvious to Staples that the premise of Lowell's quest is the unequivocal renunciation of Puritanism, where " the pervasive tone of these spiritual exercises is somber and violent"¹⁶. Yet the lines in which man is described a " stray dog" (" The Crucifix" l. 19, L.U.) is a reference to the Christian notion of the depravity of man, which the Puritans in particular emphasized. " The Crucifix" is also the signpost of Christian salvation.

Likewise, " On the Eve of the Feast of the Immaculate conception, 1942", the perverted Christianity in war is paradoxically balanced by the spirit of martyrdom, in which there is " a re-killing of Christ in the form of dead soldiers". The close-open movement is manifest in the ambivalence of the poem. This movement involves a definite beginning that ends in ambiguity; whereas the open-close movement entails the shift from an ambiguity to resolution. The soldiers are martyrs, but war itself is perverted Christianity: their martyrdom is at once asserted by the comparison to Christ, rendered in a dubious light by perverted Christianity the war implies to Lowell. There is also the open-close movement in the way Lowell regards his ancestors. On the one hand, he has absorbed as a fact of horror the death of the Indians at the hands of the white man. Some of those white men are Lowell's ancestors, and on the other hand he has a respect for the achievements and personalities of early Americans.

In " Park Street Cemetery", the first poem in the collection, Lowell presents not only a life of futility, but death is also void of any spiritual connotations: " only / the dead are poorer", (l.2). the graves of the Puritan forefathers are given over to " cables" which " wreath the spreading obelisk" (l.3), and " dusty leaves". This profane picture of death conveys the fallacy of both the Puritan heritage and the glory which the early Puritan sought: " What are Sam Adams or Cotton Mather?"(l.15) is a question which is left

unanswered, but the implicit meaning is easily noticeable. Their efforts were as futile as, presumably, their spiritual after-life. In an ironic image, it is death, conveyed by the "Dusty leaves and the frizzled lilac", (l.8) that "Liven this elder's garden with baroque" (l.9). the words point to spiritual death in the grave and the falsity of the "Paradises of the Puritan Dracos" (l. 16) on earth, for the whole ground in which they lie "Has settled in saecula saeculorum" (l. 11).

In "Satan's Confession" there is the reference to Original Sin, an attempt to understand the meaning of good and evil. Humanity is presented as the "Image of the Divine" (l. 8), but in a depraved form for it is "idle" and "rich". The question "What holds your hand?" generates answers that continue the idea of depravity. Man is greedy, he has turned away from God because of the "Fat of the land" (l. 10) and the depravity continues in "My wife's a bitch; / My Garden is Love's shrine", (l. 11-12). But there seems to be a nagging suspicion that God is not free from blame. He has built "His Garden Wall" "high" and "stout", (l. 13) presumably to keep out evil, but it is:

Not high enough nor stout
To keep snakes out; (and so)
Nick bends the Tree
The woman takes the Fall.
("Satan's Confession", ll. 15-18)

Nevertheless, Lowell adheres to a religious spirit. Christ is shown as the Savior, and on His cross

The roots of sin are bowed,
Christ nails them to the wood,
("Satan's Confession", ll. 104-105)

In Land of Unlikeness, therefore, Lowell fails to break out of the fierce contradictions between past and present, between Puritanism as an ideal and Puritanism as history which led indirectly to World Wars. The 'close-open' movement in his poems reflects his mental and moral vortex. The question raised often by the Great War of whether it was man who had failed Christianity, or Christianity which had failed man is not resolved. Locked as he is in contradictions, Lowell sees that both cases are true. In "Christ for Sale", he sees that Christianity has failed man:

Drying upon the crooked nails of time,
Dirty Saint Francis, where is Jesus' blood
Salvation's only Fountainhead and Flood?
These drippings of the Lamb are Heaven's crime.
Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan, come and buy:
Gomorrhah, had you known the wormwood in this Dye!

("Christ for Sale", ll. 7-12)

Yet conversely, man has failed Christianity:

The lunchers stop to spit into Christ's eye.
O Lamb of God, your loitering carrion will die.

("Christ for Sale", ll. 17-18)

As in the case of all his contradictions, each point defeats the purpose of the other. The result is a gaping void, a nothingness which leaves death staring him in the face.

Therefore in conclusion, it may be said that whereas Lowell "fails to make an overall intellectual or historical connection between the past and present"¹⁷, Eliot, with a wider range of vision, treats the contradictions in past

and present through the intellectualized approach of the process of history, resolving the ambiguities by "negative capability". The result is that death for Eliot functions as a means to spiritual life; but to Lowell it is a gruesome fact which he cannot overcome. Lowell finds himself caught in the contradictions of moving from one form of institutional Christianity to another. Thus, Lowell uses

Religious...framework to give the poems the cohesion they desperately need; the stories help objectify and give form and structure to the violent feelings that leave him at cross-purposes.¹⁸

Eliot, on the other hand expands his vision to encompass the experience of mankind to reach spirituality, so that ultimately he will embrace a form of Christianity more inclusive than the rigid Puritanism of his first American ancestors.

Notes

1. Norma Procopiow, Robert Lowell and his Critics (Chicago: American Literary Association, 1984) 139.
2. Procopiow 139.
3. Hugh B. Staple, Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years (N.Y: Straus and Cudahy, 1962) 23
4. Philip Hobsbaum, A reader's Guide to Robert Lowell (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988) 18.
5. Genesis Jones, Approach to the Purpose: A Study Of the Poetry of T.S. Eliot (London: Hodder and Staughton, 1966) 101.

6. David Daiches, " Notes" to " The Waste Land", The Norton Anthology of English Literature Vol. II (N.Y: Norton and Co., 1968) 1785.
7. Daiches 1785.
8. Vivian de Sola Pinto, Crisis in English Poetry 1880-1940(London: Hutchinson 1967) 156.
9. Dasiches 1784.
10. Dasiches 1785.
11. Dasiches 1787.
12. A. G. George, T.S. Eliot: His Mind and Art (Bombay: Asia Pub. House, 1969) 153.
13. George 151- 8
14. Staple 22.
15. Staple 23.
16. Richard J. Fein, Robert Lowell (N.Y: Twayne Pub., 1970) 33.
17. Mark Rudman, Robert Lowell: An Introduction to the Poetry (Columbia Univ. Press, 1983) 14.

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