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Fleeting Time and Endless Yearning: A Study of T.S. Eliot's Ash Wednesday.

A B S T R A C T

This research aims at exploring the theme of time and existential agony in Thomas Stearns Eliot's (1888-1965) Ash Wednesday (1930). It highlights how Ash Wednesday marks Eliot's deep examination of both time and mortality, uncovering the deep aspects of his existential reflections. Through placing this poem within a broader literary and spiritual perspective, this research illustrates Eliot's "chromophobia" fears and meditations on progress in age, loss, and spiritual ascent; not only does it mirror his personal struggles but also engage with philosophical questions about existence and the mortal condition. Therefore, this study contributes to understanding Eliot's poetic career and highlighting how it deals with time that informs his pursuit for meaning and improvement in a fragmented world.

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الزمن العابر والشوق الأبدى: دراسة لقصيدة أربعاء الرماد للشاعر ت. س. إليوت

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مركز البحوث والدراسات التربوية

المُستخلص

يهدف البحث إلى استكشاف موضوع الزمن والمعاناة الوجودية في قصيدة أربعاء الرماد (1930) للشاعر ت. س. إليوت (1888-1965). ويسلط البحث الضوء على قصيدة "أربعاء الرماد"، التي تجسد مفهوم إليوت العميق للزمن والفناء، وكشف الجوانب الخفية لتأملاته الوجودية. ومن خلال وضع هذه القصيدة ضمن منظور أدبي وروحي أوسع، يستكشف هذا البحث مخاوف إليوت "رهاب الزمن" وتأملاته بشأن التقدم في العمر والخسارة والصعود الروحي لا تعكس صراعاته الشخصية فحسب، بل تتفاعل أيضاً مع الأسئلة الفلسفية حول الوجود والحالة الإنسانية؛ لذلك تسهم هذه الدراسة في فهم مسيرة إليوت الشعرية، كما يسلط الضوء على كيفية تناوله لموضوع الوقت في سعيه وراء المعنى والارتقاء في عالم مجزأ.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أربعاء الرماد، الشوق الأبدى، الوجودي، الدائم، الشباب.

Introduction

In 1914, Eliot became deeply influenced by the cultural and modern literary movements. After 1919, Eliot experienced personal turmoil, including an anxious marriage to the depressed governor, Vivienne High-Wood, which contributed to his emotional state and creative production. After this time, Eliot converted to Anglicanism in 1927, which profoundly influenced his later works, such as *Ash Wednesday*, but he did not dispatch it to the public until 1930 (Creasy, 2016: 6). This poem reflected his exploration of faith, redemption, and the search for spiritual meaning. It marks a crucial moment in Eliot's literary career (Acaroid, 1984). Critics consider it notable because it presents traditional Christian imagery blending with modernist themes, echoing Eliot's unique voice and approach to modern poetry. In 1930, *Ash Wednesday* received critical reviews and has since been known as a crucial achievement in Eliot's legacy. It indicates his transition towards a more obviously religious perspective in his later works. It also reflected his personal and spiritual journey following his conversion to Anglicanism. Thus, the poem represents a production of profound introspection and a quest for meaning in a post-World War I, where traditional values and discipline were being questioned. In addition to the disorder and alienation that Eliot experienced, which influenced his conception of time and existence.

Historically, as a scientific discipline, the word philosophy is derived from the Greek word "philosophia," which means "love of wisdom." Its roots dated back to ancient Greece around the 6th century BC. The first philosophers, known as pre-Socratics, such as Thales and Anaximander, inquired about essential questions regarding the nature of the cosmos and knowledge existence. Later on, this intellectual movement developed with men like Socrates and Aristotle, who placed the groundwork for Western philosophical thought (Johnson, 2021:8)

According to *the Cambridge dictionary*, 'philosophy' means "the study of fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and

language. Philosophers explore topics like ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and logic, often seeking to understand the nature of reality and human experience (2015). Reading Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* through a philosophical lens requires figuring out its themes and meanings related to spirituality, existence, morality, and the human experience. Such themes investigate the poem's reflections on individuality and the search for meaning, aesthetics, including the nature of beauty, and emotional responses aroused by the art. Analyzing the language and meaning also helps to provide deeper insights and raise philosophical questions.

Ash Wednesday can be analyzed through philosophical perspectives as it deals with themes of spiritual struggle, identity, and the search for meaning. Eliot created deep spiritual internal conflict, through depicting the speaker's struggle between worldly or physical desires and the search for spiritual truth. This clash can be seen through an exploration of existential questions about the nature of fulfillment and the human state.

Eliot opened the poem by introducing a sense of temporal losing, reflecting the modernist experience of fragmentation and the chaos after the war. Reflecting his views on this chaos, he offers excuses saying, *Because I do not hope to turn again/ Because I do not hope*. Emphasizing phrases used as an indication of both past and present to state the tension between memory and current experience. This disparate image captures the uncertainty of the era, emphasizing how the effects of war have disrupted continuity in human life. He continues saying:

Because I do not think

Because I know I shall not know

The one veritable transitory power

Because I cannot drink

*There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for
there is nothing again. (Eliot, 1930, L. 10-16)*

These lines effectively illustrate the speaker's conflict between material longings and the quest for inner enlightenment. They express recognition of the limits of understanding and the frustration that comes with it, reflecting a deeper existential struggle. This suggests the search for something genuine amidst the fleeting nature of life, hinting at the desire for a lasting truth beyond material concerns. This imagery evokes a longing for vitality and spiritual nourishment, yet the speaker feels incapable of accessing it, emphasizing the conflict between the allure of the material world and the quest for deeper fulfillment (Mei, A., 2018: 88)

Additionally, this resignation suggests a sense of despair regarding the impermanence of experiences and the futility of chasing material desires. Thus, these lines encapsulate the speaker's struggle with the ephemeral nature of life and the desire for meaningful spiritual connection, contrasting worldly pursuits with the quest for enlightenment.

At the first turning of the second stair

I turned and saw below

The same shape twisted on the banister

Under the vapour in the fetid air

Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears

The deceitful face of hope and of despair. (Eliot, 1930, III, L. 1-6)

These lines convey a sense of entrapment and the pain of grappling with one's spiritual and existential dilemmas, making the struggle with time and its implications very poignant. They vividly reflect the theme of struggle and the agony of time. This imagery suggests a moment of transition, symbolizing both progress and the challenges that come with moving forward. The repetition of the *same shape* implies a cyclical nature of struggle, as if one is captured in a loop of experience, unable to escape past burdens. This personification of struggle captures the internal conflict between hope and despair, highlighting how the passage of time can bring both aspiration and disappointment (Dayal, 1998:37).

The speaker's recognition of permanent change, echoing the dislocation, corruption, and selfishness that existed in society in the aftermath of World War I. Eliot's use of this line indicates both personal loss and a broader existential crisis that defines the modernist experience. The war disintegrates previous certainties, leading to a collective sense of fragmentation (Sawyer, 2010: 248). What confirms and proves the validity of the view regarding Eliot's age is the first line in the poem itself, in which Eliot asserted that the time that has passed and the youth that has withered or is about to disappear cannot be restored because returning to the past is absolutely impossible and because what was once will never be.

Eliot employed the theme of time to focus on the state of society. He contrasted secular and religious notions of time. References to the liturgical months and the significance of *Ash Wednesday* highlight the cyclical nature of religious observation. This cyclical interpretation stands in plain contrast to the linear calendar of time experienced in modern life, which is monotonous, spiritually empty, and fragmented, suggesting a yearning for a return to spiritual paces and perpetual truths between a chaotic temporal landscape. (Sawyer,2010: 285). Eliot's use of imagery creates a sense of an "eternal present," From philosophical point; this concept explores the nature of time where previous experiences inform the present moment. He evoked reflection on previous actions and their consequences demonstrate how personal history shapes current identity and spiritual state. This is significant as it aligns with Eliot's own existential inquiries during the poem's composition, probing the meaning of existence and the possibility of reclamation. Suggesting state where past and future is emphasizing a focus on the present time as the only truth, " Because I know that time is always time (17).The speaker summons memory and the impact of formative experiences. By using flash memory, the speaker creates a moment, where memories and experiences become current consciousness, emphasizing the complexity of human awareness.

Through his spiritual journey in this poem, Eliot explored many philosophical themes. Such as themes of nature, faith, the struggle between the spiritual and material, faith

and doubt, desire and renunciation, temporal duality and more. In his early years, Eliot wrote *Prufrock* at the late thirties. As he grew up he wrote again about age and yet he still complaining, saying: "I am growing old... I am growing old". However, the weight of this feeling of the expiration of time, the end of the days of life and the anguish it brings, and the deep, or metaphysical, energy it requires. All these sensation can bear the abyss of permanent nothingness, only reached its greatest intensity in *Ash Wednesday*, which he published when he was at the beginning of his fifth decade in the 1930s.

Hence, the entire poem emerges from the fact that the wheel of time does not turn backwards at all, and that reaching the top of the stairs means the end of the ascent and the beginning of the inevitable descent. Time is the greatest hero in Eliot's poetry, and therefore man is incapable of facing loss, and there is no chance of gain at all. All that is in man's hands in this time is nothing but mercury that escapes from the hand's grasp as soon as it is touched or held. This becomes clear when the first part of the poem ends, where Eliot confirmed it is no longer possible for him to speak up more than he did. As long as returning to youth is impossible, all that remains is for him to be happy, or he must do something that he can be happy about. Therefore, he prayed to God to have mercy on him and longs for a light sentence from God upon his poor soul (Dayal,1998:37). He no longer has wings to fly with; the air surrounding him is dry, and even his space is narrow. In any case, he only needs someone to pray for his sins or to pray now and at the hour of his death. Thus, these are all his dire needs, as his life is drawing to a close and he is very close to death.

A philosophical reading of the subject of time indicates that time is skillfully integrated, touching on personal and existential aspects. A philosophical interpretation of this topic illustrates Eliot's turning views. In his chapter on T.S. Eliot, Cuda (2014) discusses Eliot's profound assignation with themes of spirituality and modernity, underlining how Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism influenced his later works, particularly *Ash Wednesday* (485). Eliot experiences time through presenting duality as both linear and cyclical. The liner side signifies a journey intended to

spiritual rebirth supported by the liturgical calendar and personal achievements. While the cyclical nature signifies the repetitive nature of human experience, suggesting that while individuals may seek transformations, they are often trapped in the same pattern of sin and struggle:

Although I do not hope to turn again

Although I do not hope

Although I do not hope to turn (Eliot, IV, 1-4)

Wavering between the profit and the loss, Eliot uses evocative memories of the New England coast from his youth to convey the speaker's persistent attachment to the sensual past, to the worldly pleasures and emotions that he must, it seems, leave behind in his quest for spiritual fulfillment. Not only representing a spiritual journey but also Eliot's personal confrontation with the inescapable passage of time. (Cuda, 2014: 459).

Then, he says, *Because I cannot hope to turn again / Consequence to the event.* (24-5) Eliot highlighted how past experiences shape present consciousness by exploring his memory. The speaker's memory is filled with both regret and longing, which influences his spiritual journey. This brings into line the existentialist themes where individuals are distinct by their past. This existential dilemma deals with how to reconcile the weight of the past, past events and experiences, with the need to find purpose and meaning in the present. Here, Eliot considers the fleeting memories of the significance until he reaches an interaction between memory, regret, and identity.

In the following lines, Eliot presents reflections about a yearning for transcendence beyond the confines of time, indicating that true spiritual fulfillment lies in a relationship with the eternal. The previous state reinforces the finality of time, marking a sense of loss and resignation, which signifies a search for resolution, emphasizing a desire for clarity amid temporal confusion. The acceptance of irreversibility highlights the weight of actions over time, emphasizing the importance

of understanding and learning from the past (Wilson, P. A. 1963:53)
This hope for leniency reflects the speaker's vulnerability to time's consequences, encapsulating a desire to find peace, despite the burden of existence.

And pray to God to have mercy upon us

And pray that I may forget

These matters that with myself I too much discuss

Too much explain

Because I do not hope to turn again

Let these words answer

For what is done, not to be done again

May the judgement not be too heavy upon us(Eliot,I, 27-34)

The speaker's contemplation of the limitations of understanding and the transient nature of life reflects a desire to escape the burdens of time, resonating with the idea of pursuing the eternal. As these lines evoke a sense of introspection, they encourage the speaker and the reader to consider their existence beyond immediate concerns and align them with a desire for a spiritual or timeless truth. The traumatic memory disrupts the experience of time" indicates that trauma can create a sense where individuals perceive the past as actively affecting their current situation, interrupting the natural progression of time(Kadhim, H., & Hamad, S, 2024:52)

The chasing of the eternal brings to mind a way to escape the problems of time, inviting readers to consider the significance of their existence within a larger, timeless context. In short, this suggests a yearning for something beyond temporal existence, heading toward a spiritual or eternal truth that transcends time. This leads to talk about the rituals on *Ash Wednesday*, which serve as a connection between the temporal and the eternal. They act as a bridge that marks significant moments in time to facilitate

spiritual reflection and transformation. Through ritual, the individuals can transcend ordinary time, tapping into a rhythm that connects them to a larger spiritual narrative.

*And the light shone in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word. (V, 7-9)*

The use of the *silent Word* with the capitalizing of the *w* refers to a connection to divine existence, the Christ and the idea that amidst the chaos, there is still an essential spiritual truth. This theme ties closely to the notions of memory and identity, as the speaker deals with their past while looking for clarity and peace. The use of this imagery evokes the ritualistic aspect of time, emphasizing the significance of specific moments for reflection and spiritual awakening (Saito, J. 1990:294).

*Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.(35-40)*

Ash Wednesday can be closely tied to Eliot's concerns about aging, loss, and spiritual growth, reflecting broader inquiries about life and the human experience. The lines' acknowledgment of transitory power and the limitations of understanding resonate with Eliot's contemplation of aging. Over time, the speaker struggles with the certainty of experiencing loss and the temporary nature of life. This shows a common human worry about dealing with the passing of time and the decline of energy. The longing for deeper meaning, as expressed in the lines, aligns with Eliot's quest for spiritual enlightenment amid material distractions (Wilson, 1963: 64). The struggle to "drink" from the sources of renewal (like the flowering trees and flowing springs)

symbolizes the desire for growth and transformation, echoing Eliot's own journey as he seeks to reconcile his spiritual aspirations with earthly realities. Eliot's "chromophobia," or fear of change and the vibrancy of life, ties into these reflections. The speaker's hesitance to embrace the beauty of life represented by flourishing trees mirrors Eliot's anxiety about the dynamic nature of existence and the fear of confronting change. This fear complicates the search for meaning, highlighting the tension between the desire for stability and the inevitability of transformation. It also reflects the disjointedness of society, as a societal theme (Stolarek, 2014: 240).

As Eliot navigates his personal challenges, he taps into collective human inquiries about existence, meaning, and progress. The sense of fragmentation in this poem mirrors the fragmented nature of modern life, emphasizing how individual experiences of aging, loss, and spiritual longing echo within the larger societal context. This fragmentation is exemplified when the poet indicates that speaker's personal experiences of aging and loss are interrupted throughout the poem, viewing a fragmented image of the passage of time.

Conclusion

The poem also accentuates the heaviness of the present moment, where time is loaded with meaning and urgency. Eliot's contemplation on the present serves as a reminder of the fleeting nature of life and the significance of mindfulness in spiritual preparation. This echoes the existential philosophy, where the present is the only moment that ever exists, asking individuals to confront their reality and make meaningful choices, as he says: *Teach us to care and not to care* (L.39), which explains a capture tension of living in the present moment, balancing engagement with life and the recognition of its transient nature.

Another point is when Eliot juxtaposes temporal existence with the belief of eternity. Finally, the exploration of these themes in *Ash Wednesday*, which not only illustrates Eliot's personal journey but also serves as a commentary on universal human

experiences, shedding light on the complexities of life, identity, and the quest for significance in a rapidly changing world.

In *Ash Wednesday*, time appears as a complex theme that circles the conflict between the ephemeral and the eternal. Eliot presented to the readers an invitation to reflect on their relationship with time and how it shapes identity, influences faith, and ultimately conducts the quest for redemption. Through this philosophical view, the poem becomes not just a contemplation on spirituality but also a thoughtful journey into the nature of existence itself.

The discussion above illustrates how Eliot intricately textured the theme of time throughout *Ash Wednesday*, inviting readers to consider their own experiences of time in relation to spirituality and existence. .

Eliot's work reflects a pervasive dread of the passage of time and the inevitability of mortality. He shifts from the transient to the eternal, from the secular world to the otherworldly along with the depths and ambiguousness of his powerfully modernist poetry, misleading when connected to the changes of his conversion. Whether he was referring to his profound inner mystical moments of enlightenment or leading the reader into the experimental mess of allegories, it was oftentimes obscure and therefore deceptive in terms of in-depth analysis.

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