

# Symbols and Images in T.S. Eliot

## Abstract

Meaning and scope of image and symbols multidimensional meaning of Eliot's image open ended new of his symbols a de-constructive reading of his image and symbols.

**Keywords:** Etherized, Portrait, Renaissance, Circumstance, Ambiguity, Traditional, Influences, Testimony, Multiplicity, symbolize.

## Introduction

In Eliot, image and symbols are a kind of a signifying system, which depicts the disconnected, fragmentary thoughts and ideas of the poet. These signifying systems altogether decentres the particular, determinate meaning of a text into undecidable possibilities. That is why; reading Eliot text, especially his employment of images and symbols becomes more complex and obscure. The chapter does not aim at mere collection and tabulation of the images and symbols in Eliot's poem in the traditional and formal manner; neither any attempt to classify images and symbols as the decorative, the sunken, the violet, the radical, the intensive, the expansive and the exuberant has been made, rather our intention is to reveal his ideas and to establish a relationship among images, symbols and the idea used by Eliot.

Without defining the term 'image' and 'symbol' a study of imagery remain in complete. Yet it is not easy to arrive at a definition of the term 'image', as Miss Spurgeon has rightly pointed out that 'one could easily devote a volume to arriving at a definition of an image safe-guarding and illustrating it, and to discussing what metaphor is and the philosophy which lies behind it'.<sup>6</sup> This is very difficult task to say what the term image mean exactly, however, the term 'Image' has its origin in the Latin word 'Image' which means to 'imitare' i.e. to imitate. The new English Dictionary defines an image as 'imitation, copy, likeness and similitude'. In this sense the term connotes two things : first the object to which it is applied, is a copy, an imitation of some other object and secondly, the object is an exact and faithful copy of its original'.

On the other side, 'Symbol' is very akin to what we have discussed now. Symbol, as the 'Oxford English Dictionary' records, is 'a token, a sign which stands for the other'. It means that 'symbol' is a system of 'sign', which depicts the thought of the poet in a concrete, brief and justified way. Eliot's use of images and symbols, which may be jointly named as 'imagery or word-picture', altogether, changed the shape of his poetry. Before discussing the function of the images and symbols in his poetry, it is also necessary to have a look at the sources and influences, which made Eliot's images more complex.

## Review of Literature

There was a multiplicity of influence which worked upon the poetic career of T.S. Eliot, his earliest poetry appears to be wholly dependent upon literary resources, we have Eliot's own testimony to it when he wrote that, 'the form in which I began to write, in 1908 or 1909, was directly drawn from the study of Laforgue'<sup>9</sup> Eliot may have written that after having read Arthur Symon's 'The Symbolist Movement in Literature', which introduced him to Jules Laforgue. What Eliot strives in his work is to fuse the past and the present. A.D. Moody says the Eliot tries to recapture 'not merely his own past life, but of his ancestors and of the race'.<sup>10</sup> Besides Laforgue, the late Elizabethans, especially the dramatists helped him develop a style. Those whom he studied with great care were Christopher Marlowe, Webster, Toumeur, Middleton, Ford, but he owed much to Laforgue. So also Eliot draws his conceits even from the flora and fauna, the very Nature and life itself. A selective study of his poem ranging from the very early poetry to the later religious poem will vividly show Eliot's use of the complicated image-Clusters and conceits and their essential function in the text.

Indeed, his tragedy remain that a man for whom love is beyond achievement but still within desire. His age, his shyness, esoteric quality of



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his name, with its obtrusive initial 'J.' (recalling the signature T. Stearns Eliot, which Eliot used), underscore his demurness. The name Prufrock, which sounds like the man, was borrowed from a St. Louis family. It was a good choice. Williamson has rightly said, 'It represents mixed reaction to things, the subjective mocked by the objective, the discrepancy between appearance and reality'. Moreover, the name Prufrock has two words hidden in it, namely 'Prudent' and 'frock' which symbolizes the prudence of the character as well as his feminine self. The opening image in the poem symbolizes through bathos the helpless Prufrock's subjective impression of the evening, which is like an anaesthetized patient because he himself is one. The word 'etherised' is at once a clinical metaphor and a romantic image. Prufrock sees the evening in the aspect of etherisation and the metaphor of etherisation suggests the desire for inactivity to the point of enforced release from pain. As the imagery shows his world is a closed one. Various opposition convey Prufrock's sense of impotent inferiority or isolation, such as the 'evening' against the 'sky' and the patient on the table. To illustrate further, let us first examine the opening lines of Prufrock's soliloquy :

'Let us go then, You and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the  
sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table;  
Let us go, through certain half-deserted  
streets,  
The muttering retreats  
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:'  
(Love Song, P-3, L-1-7)

#### **Aim of the Study**

In Eliot's poem use of imagery means the description of the immediate perception in figurative term, which expand to express an emotional attitude towards a more complex thing. The image of the spreading 'fog' as 'cat', reflects his mental state; desires which ends in inertia. If the 'cat' image suggests sex, it also suggests greater desire of inactivity. Like the fog Prufrock's mind is lazy and hazy and wants some cure for Postponement of his decision. Eliot represents through the imagery of fog the dirty and unhealthy physical environment of modern city life. Then again the repetition of the same line, the coming and going of the ladies in the room and following of Michelangelo shows the conflict in the mind of Prufrock. In this section Eliot uses the common imagery of the 'stair'. It occurs sixteen times in Eliot's poem, five times in Prufrock groups and eleven times in rest of Eliot's poetry. The 'stair' imagery occurs twice in 'The Waste Land'. In the 'Love Song' for example:

'And indeed there will be time  
to wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'  
Time to turn back and descend the stair'  
(Love Song, P-4, L-38-39)

A brief study of the other poem of the first volume shows the same trend. The poem 'Portrait' also begin with 'smoke' and 'fog' depicting the sterility of the age. The image of the 'music' unites the poem

out of its various fragments. The music create an euphonic sound before the lady when she is trying to find 'friendship' in this world, the same music becomes a cocophony, a 'dull tom-tom' when it is perceived that the lover or the agent is indifferent and hostile to any positive relation. Moreover, the literary allusion ranging from the epigraph to the end of the poem essentially presents the futility of relation. The epigraph from Marlowe's 'The Jew of Malta', the allusion to Shakespeare's play 'Romeo and Juliet', the song of Frederic Chopin altogether explain the purposelessness and nothingness of relation. In the next poem 'Preludes' there is a Unity of mood and imagery in the sequence. The imagery is drawn from Eliot's direct experience of the grim realities of city life. The image of smell in the second stanza of the poem emphasizes, Eliot's presentation of the urban life. The image 'faint stale smells of bear' evokes association of Baudelaire's Paris, his *les fleurs du mal*, the volume of poems which depicts the squalor of city life. So also 'thousand Sordid images' portrays the naked face of a cosmopolitan city as well as the women of the city. The lonely Cab-horse, the lighting of the lamps, the masquerades symbolizes the nightmarish experience of the city life.

The opening lines of the fourth 'Prelude' are reminiscent of the evening spread out like a patient etherized upon a table in 'Prufrock'. The image of the soul is yet another example of 'de' doublement'. The concept of the soul here is rather different from that in the third 'Prelude'. There is a sensation of acute pain and suffering in its being racked across the skies and on the start Bergson's theory of creative evolution was opposed by Eliot. The image of life are devitalized. The cosmos is not shown as evolving progressively forward, animated by a vital impulse and creating new form of life. It evolves ceaselessly, devoid of meaning and depleted of vitality. The tentative solace offered is the compassion and gentleness of the suffering that redeems.

#### **Conclusion**

In the end of this section Eliot has used the functionary imagery of the beast. The 'Dog' is more important than Eliot's transformation of Webster. For it develops the 'ambiguity of planted corpse'. If 'dog' involves sir us as in 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales'-he becomes a Sign of the rising of the waters and is friendly to growth. But 'dog' may also involve Anubis, guardian of the dead, who helped to embalm the broken osiris. By his ambiguity the 'dog' presents an ironical aspect, and this irony centre in the intent of the planting, which explains the 'Hypocrite Lecteue and his ambiguity as both subject and object. The theme of the next section 'A Game of Chess' presents the sterility and meaninglessness of life without love, which has been presented through the portrayal of two types of modern women in different social circumstances. They are only two pictures in a game of chess and both of them presents the contrast between life in a rich and significant setting of a London pub. The poet, in the first picture, describes the lady's bedroom with all its sensuous luxury. She is enthroned like Cleopatra in 'Antony and Cleopatra' in a bed Chamber or at her

dressings table as in 'Rape of the Lock' and also resembles imogen's 'Cymbeline' (II, 54; L-87-91) The passage symbolizes Renaissance splendours and luxuriance.

#### Endnotes

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