



Simplicity and Profundity in T.S.Eliot: An Understanding through Reader's Response Criticism

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Abstract

When “Depersonalisation”, “Dissociation of Sensibility” and “Objective Correlative” ideas are given prior importance to creation of poetry by T.S.Eliot, there emerges a school of thought that supports individualistic reader-oriented responses allowing “associations”, “feelings” and “memories” of the reader to play the key role in interpreting a literary work. While Eliot prescribes correlation of objectivity, the reader response theorists applies subjectivity. On one side, the importance is levied so highly on the creator of poetry to express with historic value and contemporary relevance, the other side focuses on the individual reader to evaluate the poems with personal relevance. So, with the readers given so much liberty whether the works so meticulously carved with value will have its effect on the reader is a question. This paper interprets and analyses the poem, “The Naming of Cats” in a reader oriented approach and attempts to the greatness of T.S.Eliot.

Keywords: T.S.Eliot, Depersonalization, Dissociation of Sensibility, Objective Correlative

Introduction

T.S.Eliot, (1888 – 1965) the recipient of the prestigious Nobel Prize in 1948, is one of the celebrated poets, literary critics, essayists, and playwrights. His contributions to the modern society are crucial. The gradual moral decay in the modern world is his prior concern. His critical works like “Tradition and Individual Talent” confesses his views on the responsibility of the litterateurs especially poets to write with “Historical Sense” and not just with the contemporary sense. However, Eliot encourages the poet to merge his contemporariness with the tradition of the glorious past as the standards of the past is of paramount importance to him as he believed that the connectivity between the past and the present is crucial in enlightening the readers.

On the other side for any reader (student community in particular) reader response theory is an endearing and appealing license as it empowers an individual reader's viewpoint to be established, unopposed within the ambit of its governing principles laid by its proponents like Louise Rosenblatt(1904 – 2005), Norman N. Holland (1927-2017), Wolfgang Iser(1926 - 2007), Stanley Fish(1938 -), David Bleich (1936 -), Hans Robert Jauss(1921 - 1997), and Roland Barthes(1915 - 1980). Their effort brings prominence to Reader Response Criticism and its inevitability both in the making of meaning, and in enlivening the text. However, anything admitted as meaning without value is unconvincing and hence needs a second thought and explanation. To answer in general the meaning made by a dull-literate, or



a bastardised version of a text be not taken as a response arguable for the purpose of reader response. It is the substantive reasonable response that counts. The liberty to interpret is not absolute or an unconditional privilege. As Lois Tyson in her *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* states:

Let me break the bad news to you up front. Depending on the kind of reader-response theory we're talking about, your response to a literary text can be judged insufficient or less sufficient than others. And even when a given reader-response theory does assert that there is no such thing as an insufficient (or inaccurate or inappropriate) response, your job as a practitioner of that theory isn't merely to respond but to analyze your response, or the responses of others, and that analysis can be found wanting(169).

Though T.S.Eliot does not allow him to be associated with any school of critics, his ideas towards the creation of poetry with “self-sacrifice” and “extinction of personality” is closely associated with the theoretical stand of the New Critics like John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, William Empson, Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate. They all insisted “close reading” of the text and understand through “form” and “meaning”. The new critics are of the polemic view to read poetry by confining to the text till objectivity is reached. It is to be noted that Eliot's standard of poetry could well be perceived only by serious reader who puts in the effort to decipher the objective meaning in it. Though Eliot supports “historical significance”, it is the responsibility of the poet to deliver it. And when it is well-delivered the reader naturally gets it despite his ability to understand through “subjectivity”.

Usually when the name, T.S.Eliot, is mentioned students and readers of literature remember only his most celebrated poems like, “The Wasteland”, “The Love Song of Alfred J.Prufrock”, “Little Gidding”, “Journey of the Magi”, “Preludes”. The poet is venerated for his serious themes of morality, birth, rebirth versus the prevailing squalid, infidelity, redemption, etc. However, many fail to give due importance to his poems with simple and enjoyable themes. Some of them are “Morning of the Window”, “The Naming of the Cats,” “The Hippopotamus” etc.

An attempt to understand the poet's mind through his works with the subjective understanding of the reader is incompatible at the outset. Just like that of the poet who creates with so much care as recommended by T.S.Eliot in his “Tradition and Individual Talent”, a serious reader applying the reader response approach could understand and appreciate the elements of value ably. Though it may be argued that the actual reader or the casual reader may tend to misconstrue the poem, it should be remembered that Eliot's way of careful wording with value-sense using simplicity in diction and precision in style controls the scope of digression by even a subjective reader. If the writer puts the right efforts it would make any good reader understand the poem, the way it is expected to be understood with meanings and interpretation that are value-based. As a way of substantiating it, the writer of this paper attempts to interpret T.S.Eliot's poem “The Naming of Cats” in the reader response way.

The poem begins in a natural way like that of a friendly talk with a casual and at the same time a scholarly tone. The poet finds that naming a cat is not a simple task as a game a



child so instantly prefers to play during the holidays. Though it sounds so silly to know about, this act involves or results in three different types of naming. At the first place some common names like Peter, James, George are used. The second type of names is catchy names for both sexes like Plato, Electra, Demeter etc. But both these type of names mentioned above are commonly found and sound like “everyday names” that can easily be remembered and gives a feel at home ease. The third type of names to the cats could reflect their physical features or their behaviours such as munkustrap, Quaxo, Bombalurina that are unique and rare unlike “everyday names”. This idiosyncratic names too add importance and special attention to their names.

However the poet feels that there is a fourth kind of name left unmentioned or not yet found out by the mankind who usually names the cat. And this name of the fourth kind cannot even be predicted by mankind as it is beyond his reach. As no man can ever think of it, the question that who else could think of it arises to which the poet strongly feels that only the cat knows it which in its meditative ecstasy enjoys the name that gives the cat so much pleasure. The poet also acknowledges that is impossible for mankind to interpret or realise or understand the name the cat enjoys “ineffably”. The poem ends here bringing smile to the readers as they read along. In the first reading the general meaning shared above would be understood. But with subsequent rereading more meanings are attached to it by way of subjectivity and psychological association and because of the influence of the interpretive community to which everyone belongs to.

Thus, the meaning of the poem is very clear at the outset. However, the thought that the poet has a deeper meaning inside also strikes the reader. When ruminated and reread it is understood that the poem indirectly represents any man naming the other be it a new born baby or a nickname a person gains throughout his life time. The notable fact is that people name their children with fancy names or common names or very unusual names but none would have the true names that reveal the real nature and temperament of the person. That name is unique and nobody knows it except the individual.

But even for the individual, it is not known easily but when consistently meditated the mind in its ecstatic state knows it which words cannot express or explain as it represents the depth of one’s character and identity in the world which is not easy to interpret or understand. Now, the poem at the superficial level is interesting to the reader with the natural happening of naming the cat. However at the deeper level, it is likely to be understood that the poem has relevance and messages to human life for self-realization and understanding of greater value in life.

Eliot, the critic has been insisting that the poet has to speak of the objective world in a detached way that is “Depersonalization” or “Extinction of Personality”. This poem is not exception to it as the purpose is not outwardly known but for the ruminating mind the comparison and association are found relevant and valid, and hence not be discarded. This “efferent” piece of poem when gets “aesthetically” approached unfolds meaning and interpretation that are associated or embedded in it. A good reader with careful thought and diligent care can make more relevance of understanding life and its deeper meaning.



The modesty of the poet is revealed in the second couplet when the poet says that the reader may call him a “hatter” meaning a silly person as he might be aware of the fact that for an ordinary reader the words and lines mean what they express in the literal sense and cannot go beyond that. Even a serious reader only understand that the pleasure is enjoyed with profound mediation and self-realization is experienced which cannot be expressed in words as it an “inscrutable singular name” that is a strange pleasure that words cannot capture it.

Thus, it is above seen that T.S.Eliot’s simplicity in observing things around and expressing the experience with in-depth meaning. His simplicity does not stimulate the reader to get digressed of the point but instead grips him to complete the poem once started. This is felt even by a reader with a subjective approach which is the essence of Reader Response Criticism. Multiple meanings and interpretations of life is possible for the poem if the reader seriously associates life and reality.

To sum up, though Eliot is found to be favoring the new critics’ ideology of seriousness with which any text could be understood objectively, Eliot’s language and style governs even the normal reader who approaches it without much of scholarly knowledge. By doing so Eliot himself has proved his philosophy of “depersonalification” and “objectivity”. Also it is to be noted that his words in “Tradition and Individual Talent” that the responsible critic looks for “*significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (Enright 301) is closely associated to both New Criticism and Reader Response Criticism.

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