

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

From Beauty to Brutality: Interrogating Humanities under Siege in Modernist Poetry

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Abstract

This article attempts to explore how modernist English poetry depicts the crisis of the humanities in the wake of World War I and the disillusionment it engendered. Moving away from the traditional focus on the “beauty” and “uplifting” nature of the humanities, the article argues that modernist poets presented a bleaker vision of the humanities under siege. This article begins by establishing the historical context, highlighting the devastating impact of the war on societal values, faith, and cultural ideals. It then analyzes how poets like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W.B. Yeats utilize various techniques—fragmentation, imagery, and symbolism—to portray the brutality inflicted upon the very essence of the humanities.

Furthermore, this article examines the themes of alienation and disillusionment in modernist poetry. It explores how poets depict the erosion of traditional values, the questioning of established institutions, and the struggle to find meaning in a world shattered by war. The article also acknowledges the influence of poets like W.H. Auden, who sought to reaffirm the power of the humanities to offer solace and meaning in the face of despair. However, the primary focus remains on the dominant theme of the humanities under siege, highlighting the anxieties and uncertainties surrounding their role.

By analyzing specific poems and drawing upon relevant critical frameworks, the article concludes by demonstrating how modernist poetry serves as a powerful record of the crisis of the humanities in the early 20th century, offering valuable insights into the ongoing debate about their significance in a constantly evolving world.

Keywords: Humanities, Bleaker, Fragmentation, Crisis.

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World War I, sometimes referred to as “The Great War,” is a pivotal moment in human history where notions of progress and civilization clashed with the brutal reality of widespread destruction. This distinctive conflict inflicted global suffering, emphasizing humanity's capacity for self-annihilation. The origins of World War I can be traced back to intricate networks of nationalism, militarism, and intricate alliances. The atrocities observed on the battlefield were unprecedented. Modern weapons such as machine guns and chemical agents caused mass casualties among soldiers, while trench warfare led to prolonged standoffs. In Chapter 5 of Will Morrissey's *Churchill and De Gaulle: The Geopolitics of Liberty*, Churchill's observation has been recorded:

The world on the verge of the catastrophe was very brilliant. Nations and Empires crowned with prizes and potentates rose majestically on every side, lapped in the accumulated treasures of the long peace. All were fitted and fastened- it seemed securely- into an immense cantilever. (Morrissey 122)

War had a devastating impact on human lives. Millions of soldiers died, and numerous civilians were affected by injury, disease, and displacement during the conflict. After the war, a generation was left physically and psychologically injured and scarred. World War I destroyed the hopeful beliefs of the 19th century and marked the beginning of a period characterized by pessimism and despair. In one of his famous speeches delivered on April 4, 1967, Martin Luther King made an insightful remark on war while speaking about “Beyond Vietnam”: “So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such” (King).

World War I had significant and enduring effects on humanity beyond only the immediate deaths. It caused the downfall of empires and laid the groundwork for future conflicts, such as the even more destructive World War II. The conflict hastened notable technological progress while also standardizing the possibility of widespread, mechanized combat. Chemical weapons usage caused significant damage to the environment and violated ethical standards in warfare, foreshadowing future tragedies.

World War I fundamentally questioned conventional ideas of heroism and morality. The battle destroyed beliefs in chivalry and honour, exposing the harsh truth of industrialized carnage and the complete lack of concern for human suffering. Poets such as Wilfred Owen portrayed the stark difference between idealized views of war and its harsh truth, illustrating the pain and disappointment of a generation sacrificed in battle. He wrote, in his iconic poem “Dulce et Decorum est,” “If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs...” (Owen).

The consequences of World War I as a danger to humanity go beyond its initial casualties and restructuring of the global political map. The battle diminished belief in advancement and had a lasting impact on future events. Philosopher Simone Weil has deeply studied this absence and lack of trust. She discussed a significant and severe human catastrophe while documenting her thoughts on the contemporary European dilemma. In one of her writings, Weil has recorded her ideas in the following way:

Since history is past and exists only on paper, it is easy to entertain the illusion that all previous periods were peaceful compared to the one in which we are now living, just as twenty-year-old adolescents always feel they are the first to have ever experienced the anxieties of youth. Nevertheless, one can say with no fear of exaggeration that the part of humanity in our little corner of Europe that has ruled the world for so long is going through a profound and serious crisis. (Weil/ Nielsen)

T.S. Eliot's poetry is extraordinary in its ability to convey the deeply terrible effects that World War I had on both society and the individual psyche. His masterpieces such as *The Waste Land* and "The Hollow Men," shed light on the unrefined cruelty that decimated the planet and permeated into the fabric of life in the aftermath of this war. A civilization that is struggling with disillusionment, fragmentation, and an erosion of purpose is represented in Eliot's poetry, which presents a blistering condemnation of the world.

One of the most stunning examples of violence that can be found in Eliot's poetry is the picture of a bleak and spiritually barren region. The vivid depiction of a crumbling world filled with broken souls in *The Waste Land* is striking. Its opening lines immediately set the tone: "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain" (Eliot). The spiritual aridity and profound sense of loss that are present in a world that has been affected by war are brought out by the imagery of the "dead land" and the juxtaposition of death and an attempt at rebirth that is fruitless.

War's savagery can lead to a collapse of conventional ideals and a widespread feeling of disillusionment. Eliot depicts a world in "The Hollow Men" filled with humans devoid of spirit, who have severed their ties to faith and purpose. He characterizes them as: "Shape without form, shade without colour, /Paralysed force, gesture without motion" (Eliot). The figures represent the spiritual paralysis that society is experiencing due to the war's destruction of deeply rooted beliefs.

Eliot delves into the harshness of psychological injuries endured following a conflict. The disjointed voices and incomplete pictures in *The Waste Land* indicate the broken mental condition of individuals and society. The poem is filled with violent imagery such as "rats' feet over broken glass," "bones cast in a little low dry garret," and mentions of dismemberment and decay, which reflect the profound psychological wounds inflicted by the war.

Yet, even in this grim situation, there are subtle signs of defiance against the prevailing violence. The poem delves into myth and references spiritual sources, indicating a desire for transcendence and a quest for meaning in the face of turmoil. Eliot suggests the potential for spiritual redemption, even though it may be difficult to achieve. The conflict between hopelessness and the potential for developing resilience underscores the intricacy of the post-war period.

Eliot's poetry discernibly portrays brutality despite his commonly perceived association with pessimism. He recognizes the widespread sorrow and disappointment caused by the war, and he uses vivid imagery to depict it. His sketches of the disturbed humanity, confused and cocooned are potent testimonials to the devastating energies released by World War I and their enduring effect on the human mind.

Eliot's utilization of poetic techniques enhances the depiction of the harsh truths of a post-war society, in addition to his specific poetry. His fractured and allusive style mirrors the fragmentation of society, culture, and the human self. The contrast between different visuals and voices causes a jarring effect that reflects the turmoil and confusion of the post-war environment.

The doctoral thesis of Patricia Anne Gabilondo, "Modernity and War in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot," attempts to highlight the intricacies of the crisis in humanity and the manifold conditions that show the terrible relationship of everyday human interactions. And this one is most prominently seen and observed in *The Waste Land*. Gabilondo interprets a particular section of *The Waste Land* in the following way:

The recalling of the conversation in the Hofgarten and of the Hyacinth girl is a "psychic quotation" from some private, individual past, which when verbally "recollected" seems to elude full presentation, remaining fragmentary and enigmatic in its distance. (Gabilondo 93)

Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" also addresses the worries and disappointments of the pre-war era, although not being specifically about war. Prufrock's inner conflicts and feelings of isolation suggest a world on the verge of a significant change. He perceives himself as unimportant and without confidence in a world that requires courage. The line "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" (line 85) demonstrates his internal conflict of feeling like an outsider, without the confidence and stature to handle social interactions. His worries are evident in his fear of social connection and the possibility of rejection. He foresees a "overwhelming question" (line 38) and is concerned about the judgement of the women he wants to impress. The lines "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (lines 73-74) suggest a desire for a more straightforward and non-judgmental life. Prufrock's fears go beyond his own concerns and include a more general feeling of disappointment with contemporary society. He witnesses a society lacking significance and direction, saturated with "love songs" that he deems as mere deception (line 67). The poem's imagery, exemplified by "the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table" (lines 4-5), depicts a world devoid of vitality, intensifying his feeling of disillusionment.

On the other hand, "Hollow Men" paints a bleak picture of a society that is emotionally and spiritually devoid of any kind of growth. The "hollow men," which is a metaphor for the generation who came of age after the war, are devoid of purpose, conviction, and religion. A great sense of human crisis is brought about as a result of the poem's indictment of a civilization that places a high priority on materialism and superficiality. Eliot's criticism goes beyond the scope of the person and attempts to get mingled with the larger societal systems. The poem contributes to the severe feeling of emptiness. The poem alludes to a planet that has been wrecked by conflict and disillusionment, leaving the people who live there feeling disoriented and without direction. Lines such as "This is the dead land / This is cactus land" convey an

image of a bleak and barren terrain, which is a reflection of the spiritual barrenness that exists within the civilization. On the other hand, the poem is critical of a culture that places a higher value on superficiality and materialism than it does on genuine human connection and meaningful existence.

An unfinished epic poem by Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, is a huge and complicated piece of writing that comments on a variety of topics, one of which being the crisis that people are going through. In contrast to *The Waste Land*, which is more clearly focused on the aftermath of World War I, *The Cantos* investigates broader concerns that have contributed to human misery throughout the course of history. Pound expresses his disapproval of many economic and political institutions that he considers to be exploitative and oppressive throughout the entirety of the *Cantos*. He holds elements such as usury and corrupt leadership responsible for the deterioration of society and the misery of individuals. Poetry Foundation comments on *The Cantos* in the following way:

Pound's life's work in poetry, *The Cantos*, remains a signal Modernist epic. Its mix of history, politics, and what Pound called "the periplum"—a point of view of one in the middle of a journey—gave countless poets incentive to develop a range of poetic techniques that capture life in the midst of the experience.

(Poetry Foundation)

Pound draws parallels between the present and idealized representations of civilizations that have existed in the past, namely ancient Greece and China. He expresses his regret over what he perceives to be the decline of cultural values like as respect, duty, and beauty in contemporary times, which contributes to a feeling of crisis. In *Canto LXXXI*, Pound writes: "To have gathered from the air a live tradition / or from the dead book a dead truth" (*Canto LXXXI*).

By expressing the need to counteract the feeling of “dead truth” in the present, this sentence conveys the urge to bring back cultural traditions. *The Cantos* examines individual problems within the context of larger society issues, despite the fact that it is mostly concerned with historical events. In a world that is seen to be chaotic and unjust, the characters struggle with feelings of alienation and disappointment, as well as the search for meaning. Despite the fact that it presents a pessimistic outlook, *The Cantos* also makes hints about possible solutions to the human dilemma. Throughout his work, Pound investigates ideas such as “right governance” and the significance of ethical leadership, offering suggestions on how to construct a more ideal society.

An outstanding piece of work that attempts to establish a connection between eccentricity and a life of duty, Ezra Pound's translation of the Chinese poet Li Po is a work of extraordinary quality. Some of the lines of this translation are not only pure gems but also reflections of society and culture torn between two opposite emotions and feelings. The lines go in the following way:

And before the end of the day we were scattered like stars or rain.
I had to be off to So, far away over the waters,
You back to your river-bridge.
And your father, who was brave as a leopard,
Was governor in Hei Shu and put down the barbarian rabble.
And one May he had you send for me, despite the long distance;
And what with broken wheels and so on, I won't say it wasn't hard going ...
Over roads twisted like sheep's guts. (Li Po/ Translated by Pound)

W.B. Yeats's poetry is intricately intertwined with the concept of individuals experiencing a crisis. An Irish poet who lived during volatile times, he witnessed personally the political upheaval of Ireland, the atrocities of World War I, and the fears of a world that

was swiftly changing. He incorporates these experiences throughout his work, which reflects a diverse perspective on human difficulties, both on an individual and a societal level.

Yeats's poetry frequently deals with the loss of trust and confidence, which is a recurrent theme. Poems such as "The Second Coming" depict a world that is on the verge of apocalypse. The following lines reflect the true essence of Yeats' insightful observation on human crisis:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, (Yeats)

He attempts to portray a society which is ever-changing and at the same time is both horrible and unavoidable. This is a reflection of a larger societal movement away from conventional religious beliefs and the rise of a world that is more sceptical and fractured.

The human urge for meaning and purpose is something that Yeats struggles with when he is confronted with a dilemma. Within the confusion of the present, poems such as "Sailing to Byzantium" depict a yearning for a timeless and transcendent truth that exists beyond the present. This yearning may also be observed in his obsession with Irish mythology and folklore, which can be seen in poems such as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," in which he finds refuge in a simpler and more romanticized past.

The disappointment that follows the loss of beloved aspirations is a topic that Yeats frequently investigates. Poetry such as "Easter, 1916" is a memorial to Irish revolutionaries who were put to death following an unsuccessful revolt. The poem acknowledges the difficulty of the situation while also recognizing the sacrifice that they have made: "All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born." This is a reflection of the poet's attempt to balance his own goals with the harsh realities that exist in the surrounding environment.

In addition, Yeats investigates the human crisis from a personal perspective. Several of his poems illustrate the internal conflict and search for self-definition. A poem titled “The Wild Swans at Coole” makes use of the seasonal imagery of ageing swans to symbolize the passage of time, the experience of loss, and the difficulties associated with confronting one’s own death. The cyclical conceptions of history had a significant impact on Yeats, who held the belief that civilizations go through phases of expansion, fall, and the possibility of revival. Poems such as “The Second Coming” provide a glimpse at this cyclical nature, implying that devastation can clear the way for something new to emerge. On the other hand, the possibility of a phoenix rising from the ashes is still a mystery, which has resulted in an underlying current of fear and uncertainty.

It is interesting to note that Yeats also investigates the role of the artist during times of crisis. Although he admits the limitations of art in poems such as “The Coming of Wisdom with Time,” he believes that art has the ability to provide peace and significance to those who experience it.

THOUGH leaves are many, the root is one;
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
Now I may wither into the truth. (Yeats)

The speaker in “The Tower” finds inspiration in his observation of daily life despite the chaos that is all around him. This demonstrates the capacity of art to capture and explain human experience at times of difficulty. The poetry of W.B. Yeats offers a sophisticated and comprehensive perspective on the human distress that is being experienced. He is able to perfectly depict the fears that come with living in a world that is constantly shifting, the loss of faith and assurance, the yearning for meaning and purpose, and the difficulties that individuals experience when attempting to navigate their lives. Despite the fact that he is struggling with

these concerns, Yeats recognizes the possibility of rebirth and the everlasting function of art in providing consolation and significance in the face of human suffering.

In their poems, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats both struggled with the fears of human catastrophe. However, their approaches to seeking peace and global harmony were very different from one to the other. Eliot writes several of his later poems, such as “Four Quartets,” in which he investigates the prospect of spiritual restoration through a recommitment to religious faith. This hope, on the other hand, is frequently hesitant and with a hint of uncertainty, which is a reflection of the underlying worries that are present in his work.

Yeats sought inspiration and promise for regeneration in myth and tradition, despite the fact that he was aware of the difficulties that were prevalent during his day. Poems such as “Sailing to Byzantium” depict a yearning for a timeless and transcendent reality, which is typically connected with the idealized past or artistic production. This idealized condition provides a sense of stability and meaning in the midst of the chaos that is occurring in the present.

Yeats believed that in order to achieve peace and harmony, it was necessary to establish a relationship with both the individual and the community. Poems such as “Easter, 1916” argue for the personal sacrifices that have been made for a bigger cause. It becomes evident of the significance of community in getting through difficult times. In addition to this, he delves into the personal challenges that people go through in search of meaning and purpose, arguing that personal development and fulfilment both contribute to a broader sense of harmony.

Yeats places a greater emphasis on communal and personal meaning through connections to tradition, mythology, and artistic creativity; whereas Eliot’s major concentration is on the salvation of individuals through religious faith. In general, Eliot takes on a more pessimistic tone, bringing attention to the challenges of attaining harmony in a society that is

fragmented. Despite the fact that he is aware of the difficulties, Yeats continues to have a more optimistic attitude, looking for opportunities for rebirth and significance.

In this particular context Thomas Hardy's "In Time of Breaking of Nations" should be considered for several reasons. Even though "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'" is only a few sentences long, it has a significant impact. The poem was written during World War I, which was a time of enormous worldwide upheaval. It depicts a scene that appears to be straightforward, but it actually contains a nuanced reflection on the nature of war and the impact it has on human existence.

With the skilful use of juxtaposition and irony, the poem is able to generate a grave impact on the minds of the readers. This image of constancy and routine sits in stark contrast to the ominous title, "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations,'" which immediately creates a sense of discord in the audience. The utilization of antiquated terminology such as "wight" serves to further underline the enduring nature of the agricultural work, so drawing attention to the contrast between the fleeting and destructive nature of war.

It is noteworthy that nature continues to be unaffected by the chaos caused by humans. Despite the fact that the guy appears to be naive to the ongoing conflict on a global scale, the seasons continue their cycle, the birds continue to sing, and the man continues his work. This state of apathy can be understood in a number of different ways. One interpretation of this image is that it is a representation of the continuing force of the natural world in the face of human damage. Another interpretation is that it is a symbol of the insignificance of war in the big scheme of the universe. In spite of the fact that it is centred on a particular region, in the conclusion it can be said that it is through literature and through creative works, one powerful idea can transcend its geographical setting.

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