

Exploring the Nature of Time in Thomas Stearns Eliot's "Burnt Norton"

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Abstract

*The poem "Burnt Norton" (1936) is one of the poems from his collection of poems **Four Quartets** (1936-1942). The poem is an important piece that evaluates the concept of time. This research will attempt to discuss the nature of time that Eliot tried to present in the poem. It seems that the poem has a direct influence of Bergson's philosophy of time as well as Einstein's relativity of time. The poem captures both of the influences where the nature of time is not fixed but exists in a duality where the time reference of past and future exist in the present itself. This existence is seen in the ability of the mind to go back in time to past and future references. However, the poem seems to project Einstein's relativity of time where time is relative and all the flow of time references exist simultaneously and merely an illusion.*

Keywords: Relativity, Time, references, moment

"People like us who believe in physics know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion. Time, in other words, is an illusion"

- Albert Einstein

Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) is one of the leading poets of the Modernist era. He is critically acclaimed and even accoladed for his outstanding contribution to Literature. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in the year 1948. Eliot contributed to the modern essays, dramas and poems making him one of the versatile writers of the age. His essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919 & 1920) is considered to be one of the most influential pieces of literary criticism with his impersonality theory and the establishment of objectivity of work of art. It is highly influential that he became the anticipator of the literary movement of 20th century known as New Criticism. Eliot is also clubbed with the literary movement of New Criticism because of his essay which influenced many New Critics to follow Eliot’s notion of work of art where the poet’s personal biography, history and anything exteriority of any kind is unnecessary to analyze a piece of art. Eliot imbues the Avant Garde Movement which is a combination of different movements that shaped the modern world questioning the Victorian principles of Utilitarianism, Empiricism, Darwinism, Positivism in the society. The Avant Garde Movement reached its escalated peak in the Modern Period and as a left ideology influenced many writers, thinkers, philosophers of the Period who started to criticize the Modern world. Eliot also attacked the Renaissance Humanism in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” where the period of Renaissance replaced the value of Church with the existence of man. The very being of a man was given importance and attained a significant place during the Renaissance Period. Though Eliot believes that man is significant and important in this world yet man is also equally destructible and dangerous. His theory of Impersonality has been compacted with the impact of First World War that proved the destructive nature of man and Eliot stressed on “objectivity” of the work of art derived heavily from Art for Art’s Sake movement opposing subjectivity. His protest against the idea of subjectivity and proving insignificant value to human emotions, feelings show anti-romanticism and the consequences of First World War. The literary trend of allusions become a significant used technique for many of the modernist poets and writers to attain a level of objectivity and imbue a classicist spirit to tackle the modern society and its values.

The modernist literature has been influenced by science and many poets and writers are heavily influenced by the scientific development that were taking place. The idea of time is one of the important concepts that change the course of

physics when Einstein published his famous relativity paper. However, the role of time had been accepted and explored with Newtonian mechanics. It is Einstein's relativity of time that changed Newtonian concept of time as an absolute entity into merely an illusion. Tracing the development of time in physics, it is H.G Wells who in his famous science fiction novella **The Time Machine** (1895) developed the theory on time. He questioned that if a man can travel in space, then man can also travel in time as well. H.G Wells predicted the combination of space and time generally now known as space time. According to Einstein's theory of relativity, he compiled the two entities into one and unified space and time together as one infinite fabric. The idea of time travel was also proposed by Einstein and he shows that the relativity of time means that time is an illusion and the time from past, present and future exist simultaneously. Time is relative meaning that the passage of time depends on the observer's frame of references. It means that a particular moment has a frame reference and it depends on an observer to which frame of reference he wants to make it as a present. Practically, if the given moment of reference is a present then a person can take the journey using the speed of light and move away from that particular frame of reference to the past and vice versa to the future. Critically, Einstein's theory suggest that time is merely an illusion and it entirely depends on the observer who gives a fixed position of past, present and future to the flowing frame of references. In a sense, the theory highlights that the past, present and future exist altogether but depends on one's observer frame of references.

In addition to this, Bergson's philosophy of time is also taken into account for the research. According to him, time exist in duality where he propagates the idea of inner time and outer time. He proposed that there is a time that exists in our mind which can go back to past and wonder about the future as well as flow with the linear progression of time or simply adhering to Newtonian absolute time. Many poets and writers were influenced by his nature of time as well but Eliot has shown a direct influence of both Bergson and Einstein's theory on time. The new fresh perspectives on time during the modernist era changed the entire discourse on theoretical physics and understanding of the cosmos and the universe. The poem "Burnt Norton" (1936) opens with the discourse on time.

The poem gives an insight into the nature of time where the influence of Bergson and Einstein's theory on time is formulated. The idea of time has is divided into the duality of inner time and outer time where the poem projects that there are

two times frame references of a particular moment existing in “time future”. These two times frame references are “Time present” and “time past” that exist in the frame reference of “time future” reflecting Bergson’s philosophy of nature of time. The duality of two times frame references that exist in another time frame references shows that time itself is not an absolute entity and defies Newtonian mechanics and his concept of linear time. The poem further shows that the “time future” references also exist in the flow of “time past” of references. It enumerates that time is not linear and absolute but having a plural nature where one can travel to “time future” through inner time in mind at the given moment references of “time past”. It is also noted that one can travel to “Time present” and “time past” when one is in the given moment of future references. The different moment of references always “Point to one end, which is always present” meaning the merging of two references of time in the present moment. The reason for pointing to always the present references indicate Bergson’s influences of inner time and outer time where the inner time is the flow of “time past” and “time future” in the present itself and it is the present that decides the moments from the “time future” in relation to the “time past” to what extent the possibility of future references exist and the reasons pertaining to the dissolution of past events that could have changed the future possibility. Critically, the poem establishes the existence of three time simultaneously where these three time co-exist in a single frame reference reflecting Einstein’s relativity of time. It is clearly noted in these lines

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“Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future

And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present All time is unredeemable.”

The relativity of time becomes clearer and justified when all “time is eternally present” and moving in a moment of frame references culminating as “unredeemable”. The term “unredeemable” “is a new word used by Eliot here to perhaps suggest that the flow of each tense is inescapable meaning that the flow of each tenses of time simultaneously. However, the poem exploits this influence of Einstein’s relativity of time and Eliot perhaps reduced it to the time that flows in the mind of an individual. The poem depicts that there are thousand thoughts that flows like a stream in one’s consciousness and it is in this consciousness one

can dive deeper to the possibility or probability of “time future”. For a given moment supposedly a time past and present, the future time is always an “abstraction” because of its probability to happen “Only in a world of speculation “. The time future is always abstract for time past and present as it remains a possibility to happen or merely a prediction of an event of references. However, this abstract view of one’s inner consciousness in relation to the present moment is always relative as it exists simultaneously. It means that time future references is predicted and the possibility to happen entirely relates to the present movement of events or references and this entirely always exists in alternative realities. Critically, Eliot is referring that time is relative and the “time future” of possibility is relative to the past momentum and the present event of actions decides the future possibility. These lines clearly suggest the relative nature of time:

“What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present”

It is also interesting to note that many modernist literatures depict the various flow of multiple narratives and voices in their poems or novels. According to the critic Solbes and Traver, they argued that Einstein’s relativity has a clear perception on space and time entities. They “In literature, the influences of this new vision of space and time are evident in the narration of stories from multiple viewpoints” implying that modernist literatures contain multiple narratives or voices (92). These multiple viewpoints are actually a direct influence from Einstein’s relativity. It is also evident in the poem where one can observe different multiple voices and these voices and narratives in the poem are the flows of different time frame references of a particular moment. This is the relativity and Eliot’s understanding of the modernist writing is influenced by relativity where the given moment will become a past someday and will exist in a different reality or form and will continuously to influence the present and the future references. The present and future exist because of the past but will exist in different realities. This philosophy of relativity by Einstein changed the mind of the modern literature and the poem “Burnt Norton” (1936) captures the essence of relativity. The multiple narratives or voices in the poem is relative as the time is clearly non-linear and multiple flows of different time references influences each other meaning relative to each other existing in a different alternate reality in “present”. In the poem, the different “echoes” triggers the mind of the speaker and the

“memories” in the mind of the speaker led him to meditate the “door” he never opened meaning the future possibility of “What might have been” if he took that odyssey in the “time past” and perhaps the future will be different. The other “echoes” also comes to the speaker of the future time references in the “rose-garden” where the speaker seems to disturb the passage of road that he never opened in his life. One can assess the time travel into the future time where the speaker goes into the same “rose -garden” relative to the “time past” of “what has been”. The use of allusions is evident in the poem that makes the relativity of “time past” and “time future” simultaneously co-existing in different set of realities in “present”. The imagery of a “bird” and “thrush” is an allusion to the poem of Thomas Hardy “The Darkling Thrush” (1900) that talks about the degeneration of human civilization in Western modern society. However, the poem shows the transitional and merely a future possibility but ends with a note of optimism using the imagery of the bird. Critically, the allusion to Hardy’s poem gives sense to relativity of time where the sense of “time past” envelopes in “time future” implying their existence altogether but in different realities in “present”. The poem is trying to highlight the predicament of modern society that Hardy saw in his life is the “time past” of references and the speaker in the present ponders upon the “time future” where the speaker is led by the “bird” into the “first world” in response to the “unheard music” and sees the same reality of the future. The “unheard music” is an allusion to John Keats “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819) where the speaker believes that the unheard melodies are sweeter than the heard as it remains unaffected by time. It juxtaposed in the poem “Burnt Norton” (1936) as the “first world” that the speaker entered is same as in the “time past” and also contradicts the optimism that Hardy saw in the poem where the “bird” gives a sense of hope and optimism for the poet yet the poem of Eliot lacks optimism in the “time future” where the flow of “time past” references of Hardy and Keats poem exists differently in the “time future”. This clearly reflects the meditation and nature of time that Eliot tried to explore in the poem where the “time past” is enveloped in the “time future” and the nature of time is relative as the references of “time past” exists differently in an alternative reality in “time future” meaning that past exists in the future simultaneously and the present decides the momentum of that future possibilities.

The same simultaneous flow of “time past” and “time future” is established again in the poem which reflects both Bergson’s idea on the nature of time and

Einstein's relativity of time. The flow of two different time in an individual mind as a subjective reality reflects Bergson's nature of time where time exists in different realities of past and also of future. Einstein's relativity of time comes to play scientifically in an outer view when merged the two times frame references in a present moment making the three times flow simultaneously. This simultaneously flow of all time existing "eternally" and "unredeemable" is a reflection of Einstein's relativity of time. In the poem, the usage of "We", "Us", and "I" forms the subjective reality of time within the individual mind and it is not a consciousness of plural beings but of one being having multiple consciousness in one flow like a stream of thought where time shifts back and forth. This reflects Bergson's nature of time having the inner flow of time and the outer time. However, Einstein's relativity of time seems to be questioned in the poem yet Eliot literally wonders about the idea of "present". If all time exist and flow simultaneously in one plane then the very present moment can be extracted from the flow of plane while diminishing the "time past" and "time future". This goes against the relativity of time but Eliot simply questions if one can eliminate the time and conquer time by living in the very present. According to the poem, the poem highlights that the references from "time past" and "time future" allow humans to be human and live partially away from the worries of past and future. The very living in the present allows "but a little consciousness" and being in "conscious" is not to flow with "time" and the moments in "rose-garden" as well as "in harbour where the rain beat" and "draughty at the church smokefall" be recalled. This is actually anti-romantic where the recalling of certain moment of life is done with the involvement of past and future and Wordsworth's idea of recollection with the help of emotions and feelings triggering one's consciousness simply lack time. Critically, when Eliot tried to decipher the meaning of life and having the certain chances to live as a human in the very present moment extracts the present time from the very relativity of time and hence conquers the very relative nature of "time". The poem evokes that the very moment from the past and future references in one's inner mind can be diminished only when one is present in the present given moment. When one starts to live in that moment, he defeats the illusion of time and comes back to the reality with his "consciousness". This lines clearly suggest the statement:

"Time and time future

Allow but a little consciousness.

**To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the harbour where the rain beat
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered.”**

Furthermore, the poem begins to give a clearer insight into the present state of linear time or Newtonian mechanics or his ideas on absolute time. According to Newton, time is linear and flows into an infinite state of existence. Eliot seems to project that the idea of present moment in itself is in between the past and future flow of time. The present moment is neither a “plenitude” nor “vacancy” but still points at not being fixed or still permanently. The stillness is something that the speaker seems to seek in the poem where the speaker wants to subtract the worrisome of “time past” and “time future” that flows simultaneously in the present yet the speaker acknowledges in the poem that the very present is neither dark nor has light yet it still is a “distraction by distraction “ meaning that the present itself distracts or give meaning to the life itself that one cannot hold on to that stillness or given moment in the present permanently. Critically, the speaker assumes that present is temporal and the present itself distracts the mind of the individual that the flow of “time past “and “time future” will eventually distract the individual in the present moment in time. This clearly shows that though the speaker seems to defeat time by extracting the present from the relativity of time yet still surrenders to its simultaneous flow of references in one plane.

In the last stanza of the poem, the relativity is connected to the art with the time. This relativity is the translation into art and fitting to understand the work of language being relative and appearing as an illusion in similitude to time. The poem highlights that the flow of words, speeches and pattern in a poem or any work of art “moves /Only in time”. It means that they are also relative to each other meaning that the words or speeches in any given language co-exist. The idea of relativity in art suggests that certain ideas, meanings and speeches can only be translated or comprehended only in the “end” preceding the “beginning” which makes a complete complex web of understanding any art in the beginning. The speaker also shows that these “co-existence “of the “end” and “beginning”

have always existed simultaneously when there was a “beginning” and also “after the end” establishing the relativity in art. According to Einstein theory time is an illusion and Eliot also projects that the work of art also establishes the same illusionary traits when he gives the image of a “chimera”. The reason why Eliot believes it so happening in the poem is because of the inability to bridge the words to convey the true sense of meaning flowing in the thoughts and hence the meanings that the poem convey would appear illusion and the poem remains unexpressed to the world. This web of complexity makes any poem an illusion where the true justification cannot be done and hence it is an illusion and is clearly seen when the speaker journeys into the “time future” led by the “bird” and the sound of “unheard music” which he completely undeciphered as to why it’s a possibility. The poem ends itself with the complete exposure to the idea of time being relative where the existence of present may give a sense of meaning as the “hidden laughter of children” and the movement in “rose -garden” as well as the idea of love unmoving and “stillness” in the present given moment is what a human being should aspire to live for. The merging of two times frame references in the present according to the speaker is the “waste sad time” and “ridiculous” for it lacks optimism and flows with the simultaneous co-existence of time in one plane meaning relativity of time.

Therefore, in conclusion the poem showed the both influences of Bergson’s nature of time and Einstein’s relativity of time. Their influences have portrayed well and Eliot has pointed the series of complex understanding of modern predicament through time itself. The entire poem explores modern complexity through time and the odyssey of time is non-linear but relative. Eliot also was able to bring forth relativity in the work of art and translated relativity in the making and creation of art where the simultaneous co-existence from ending to beginning and the ideas or expressions that co-existed itself from the existence from beginning and ending is what makes the modern art relative meaning of its continuum co-existence in one plane. Hence, the poem explores the nature of time being relative and exists as a subjective reality and exists simultaneously where the two different time references flow in one moment which is the present.

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