



## 'WATER' AND 'FIRE' IMAGERY AS PROJECTED BY T.S.ELIOT AND W.B.YEATS IN THEIR POETIC REALM : AN APPRAISAL

Dr. S. Chelliah

(Professor, Head and Chairperson, School of English & Foreign languages & School of Indian Languages, Department of English & Comparative Literature Madurai Kamaraj University, MADURAI-21(TN)-India.)

Email: [aschelliah@yahoo.com](mailto:aschelliah@yahoo.com)



### ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to represent T.S.Eliot and W.B.Yeats as authoritative realists, who were intuitively conscious in manipulating the imagery of "Water" and "Fire" in their poetic world. Both the poets remould the poetic sensibility of the present century through their writings. This paper neatly picturizes the similarity in their choices of images by T.S.Eliot and W.B.Yeats which indicate the similarity in their visions. The poetic career of both the poets was an endless experiment that revolves around the post-war atmosphere. Thus this paper finally insists on the statement that both the poets use "Fire" and "Water" imagery as a curious paradox to signify the same sense and meaning.

**Keywords:** *Authoritative, Realists, Intuitively, Conscious, Imagery, Similarities, Water, Fire, Vision, Experiment.*

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Literature is one of the products of the constructive or imaginative power in the mind. It is the verbal part of the process of transforming the non-human world into something with a human shape and meaning. This process of transforming ideas into images is largely unconscious and hence reflects the inner feelings and motives of the writer. That is mainly why images have been chosen to establish some kind of relation between Yeats and Eliot. In literature, particularly in poetry, the non-human natural world is symbolically associated with the human world. The two great principles of association are analogy and identity, which are reflected in the grammatical forms of the simile and the metaphor respectively.

Identity is found in mythology, which is concerned with Gods, i.e. beings in human shape identified with various aspects of physical nature. Hence mythology is a congenial language for poets, and even the more conceptual language of theology has to deal with some doctrines such as the identity of Christ with God and Man, which can be expressed grammatically only in the form of metaphor. The images like water, fire, tree etc, all serve a common purpose – that is to bridge the gap between the human and the super human in terms of natural things. “These associative constructs, considered apart from whatever assertions they may make about the structure of the external world, become a framework of association of imagery in other words ‘metaphor for poetry’ which is what Yeats in structure said they were bringing him” (Frye 8).

The true artist does not write in a vacuum, but as part of a larger, social, intellectual and spiritual order within historical time. He is “guided by the unexpected desire of his times and shows the way ... to the attainment of that which everyone blindly craves and expects – whether this attainment results in good or evil, the healing of an epoch or its destruction” (Jung 184). He shapes and is shaped by the spirit of his time, and communicates to other men his experience both as a man and as a recipient of cultural patterns and values. In order to communicate his visionary experience, the creative writer employs certain images and forms which have existed from time immemorial and have impressed him as possessing eternal values. The only function of

the writer is to manipulate these inherited tendencies into a personalised mode of expression. The study of imagery aims at discovering, therefore, the deepest meanings and patterns. The similarity in the choice of image indicates a similarity in the vision of a poet.

It has been generally agreed that T.S.Eliot and W.B.Yeats modified the poetic sensibility of the present century through their writings. Eliot is mainly remembered for the enormous influence he wielded over the post-war generation of intellectuals. His poetic career was a ceaseless process of experiment. In the words of Helen Gardener, “he wrestled all his life with the material of his art, words and meanings, attempting to be as truthful as he could” (P37). Each work to him was “a wholly new start” or “a fresh beginning” or “a raid on the inarticulate” and each time, “he gave new possibilities to poetry in a new stock of images from contemporary life” (Eliot 373). It is this devotion to his vocation as a poet, that has made Eliot the hero of many. Yeats’ chief contribution is that he created poetry essentially modern by an intensification of qualities inherent in the English language itself. To quote John Wain, Yeats’ life was a “search for a poetry that would be invulnerable to irony, capacious and strong enough to deal with the welter of discord that was modern life, in destructible even by the ‘Savage God’” (363). He began his career as a pre-Raphaelite. Born in 1865, he formed a link between the first generation of modern poets, mostly French like Verlaine, Corbiere, Mallarme, Hopkins and Rimbaud and the second Anglo-American generation of Ezra Pound and T.S.Eliot. Though Yeats began writing in the Romantic vein of the Pre-Raphaelites, he later triumphantly broke out of its small pasture and evolved a diction at once flexible and rigid as the vehicle for major movements. Irish background, rich personal relationships, political ideals and above all live interest in everything around contributed to the towering achievements of Yeats. These achievements make Yeats, along with Eliot, occupy the focal point in any account of modern poetry.

The purpose behind the use of images is to concretise abstract notions. They relate the unconscious world of the poet’s mind to external reality – the world of senses. So, usually, images are

suggestive and intense word pictures associated with sense impressions. The force of an image lies in its suggestive power – the power to call to the mind a host of associations. They intensify the organic unity of the poem. The function of an image is to universalise the individual. Eliot maintained that it is not a single image, but a unified pattern of images that contribute to the effect in literature. Eliot also held that “in a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, ideas acquire the quality of an image. A systematic patterning of images makes up the symbolic structure in the work of a poet. In his essay, “Symbolism in Painting”, Yeats opines:

“All art that is not mere story-telling,  
or mere portraiture is symbolic” (Yeats 148).

It is clear that images concretise abstractions in terms of sense perceptions. The ‘sea’ is generally thought of as a Neoplatonic image. The symbolic pattern of Neoplatonism was more or less fixed and the sea symbolized waters of emotion and passion or just life. After death, the soul, often accompanied by a mystic escort of dolphins, crossed the sea to heaven, the Isles of the Blessed. During life, the soul is tossed about the sea of emotional turbulence; but after death, living backwards through time, it recrosses the sea and returns to the island paradise from which it set out; an idea echoed in Wordsworth’s ‘Immortality ode’. Both Yeats and Eliot saw in the multitudinous grandeur of the sea the immensity of life itself and it is interesting to examine some of their poems where the image recurs. References to water, especially the river and the sea figure in many of the poems of Yeats. In ‘Easter 1916’, the stream symbolises life itself, ‘troubled’ by people living it:

“Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream” (Easter 1916,  
Line 41-44).

The lines, “A shadow of cloud on the stream/changes minute by minute” is reminiscent of Eliot’s “Then a cloud passed and the pool was empty” (BN 439). The different activities of life that go on in spite of the revolutionaries’ single minded devotion and purpose is beautifully portrayed in the image of a stream:

“A horse – hoof slides on the brim,  
And a horse splashes within it

The long – legged moor-hens dive,  
And hens to moor cocks call;  
Minute by minute they live;  
The stone is in the midst of all”

(Lines 52-57).

The sea in Yeats represents the immensity of life itself. The violence and bloodshed of the revolutions evoke the following picture in ‘The Second Coming’:

“The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned”

In ‘Sailing to Byzantium’,

The salmon-falls, the mackerel crowded seas  
Fish, Flesh and Fowl”

Stand for the material life from which the poet is trying to escape. In the final lines of ‘Byzantium’:

Fresh images beget

That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea”.

Yeats gives a description of the platonic sea, the sea of life. The sea is at “the drifting indefinite bitterness of life’. It is torn by the twin forces of sex and religion; because the dolphin is also the love – beast. “The dolphins break the flood; the flood symbolises the irrational, the confusion, the pattern, perhaps a consequence of the ‘Galilean turbulence’; against this the formal ceremonious art of Byzantium, the art of the goldsmith, hammered work linked with the ‘idea of breaking, complete the paradox of that opposition of fire and water” (The Lonely Tower 235).

**The Waste Land** is a dramatic poetic expression of the spiritual anarchy and futility of the twentieth century world. It is a cosmic vision expressing the horror existing at the base of all human experience. The central conception is of sexual impotence as a symbol for spiritual sterility. The image of water dominates the poem. Water, the availability or non-availability of it, acquires a metaphorical non-availability of it, acquires a metaphorical meaning standing for the divine grace that will meaning standing for that impurities, both of mind and body and redeem them. The lines quoted from **The Tempest**, ‘those are pearls that were his eyes’, emphasize this idea of purgation and renewal. The spiritual and material life of the waste landers will undergo ‘a sea change/into something rich and strange’ if they accept divine grace. In this context, it is worth remembering that water is one of the five elements. The evolution of the universe has

been interpreted as a cycle of creation and dissolution; the period of dissolution being that in which all matter disintegrated into the five elements. Water is considered to be a universal solvent. Its primary function is purification. The reverberation of thunder bringing rain promises to wash away the blood, sweat and tears of the land, recurring symbols in the poem. It also quenches the thirst of living beings. It makes plant life possible. Thus, it is the symbol of cosmic creativity.

The image of water and qualities associated with it give the poem its artistic unity. It should be noted that Eliot uses different forms of water for this effect. Thus, we have rain, snow, fog, frost, spring, pool, sea-water, river water, hot water, sweat, oil, spit, tears, blood, coffee etc. verbs usually associated with water recur. Some of them are wash, stir, drown, mix, sink, flow, shower, drift, crept, swell, drink, glide, swim, dive, beat, drop etc. In addition, we have turning tides, brisk swells, rippled waters, whirl pools, empty cisterns, exhausted wells, decayed holes and the like. Generally, images of impure forms of water like Sweat, spit, tar etc. are used to emphasize the defiling and defiled nature of life in the waste land. Only rain, signifying divine grace can pure the land of dirt. The most memorable reference to water in the 'Burnt Norton' is the passage, signifying the moment of divine grace:

"So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,

Along the empty alley, into the box circle,  
To look down into the drained pool  
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edges,  
And the pool was filled with water out of  
Sunlight,  
And the lotus rose quietly, quietly  
The surface glittered out of heart of light,  
And they were behind us, reflected in the  
pool,

Then a cloud passed and the pool was empty" (Burnt Norton 30-39)

This description of a point of stillness in eternity is comparable to the mid-winter spring of 'Little Gidding'. The terms used to describe those moments of intersection of time are similar. In both cases, there is a suspension of the natural sequence of events:

"When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,  
The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches  
In windless cold that is the heart's heat,  
Reflecting in a watery mirror

A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon"  
(Little Gidding Lines 4-8)

..... now the hedgerow

To blanched for an hour with transitory  
Blossom of Snow, a bloom more sudden  
Than that of murmur, neither budding nor  
fade

Not in the scheme of generation".

It will be noted that there is a qualitative difference in the image of water in *The Waste Land* and *Little Gidding*. While the unsavory qualities of water are emphasised in *The Waste Land*, water in *Little Gidding* signifies divine grace. The moment 'The Brief Sun flames the ice, on pond ditches' is undoubtedly the moment of spiritual realization. The idea is echoed towards the end of the poem in the following lines:

"At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea"

(Little Gidding 250-55)

Images relating to sea abound in the poem, 'beaches', 'starfish', 'horse-shoe crab', 'the whale's backbone', 'the delicate algore', 'sea anemone', 'Seagull', 'fishermen' etc are some of them. Yeats suggested that certain images possessed "an unchanging validity and significance capable of awakening emotional responses in men and women of all epochs" (Press 180). Like Yeats, Eliot drew a great many of his images like – rose, cross, bird, water, tree, moon, sun fire etc. from the great memory of nature (the collective unconscious of Jung) which preserves the legends of all nations. What is to be noted is that a symbol, standing by itself has only a dictionary meaning. One symbol may have "a breadth and depth of connotation while owns all the dimensions of the organic soul" (Jones 33). Fire is one such symbol that has acquired several dimensions of meaning through repeated use by Yeats and Eliot.

Fire is one of the four elements that sustain life. As per Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire from heaven for men. This earliest benefactor of mankind was punished for his presumption by being chained to a mountain in the Caucasus, where an eagle devoured his liver, which was daily renewed. In the Bible, fire is an oft repeated symbol standing for the wrath of God. The dual nature of fire – as the agent of purification and that of destruction – is often stressed by Eliot. Visual representation in the *Divine Comedy* must surely have concretised Eliot's abstraction on this concept. 'The Inferno' is one whole burning fire. Agents guilty of treachery, pride, lust, despair and other cardinal sins suffer there. In the words of Hary Blamires, "Fire is also associated with the purifying flames of purgatorial discipline, with the burning power of Divine Love, and with the ardour of human passion" (P 124). Light dispels darkness; leads us from ignorance to knowledge. Fire also aids creativity. It helps to break up matter and mould it into desiring forms. This power of fire is brought out in Blake's poem 'The Tiger'. The poet asks in what distant deeps or skies burnt the fire that brightened his eyes. What was the hand that dares to seize the fire to shape it:

"What the hammer? what the chain?  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dead grasp?  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?"

(The Tiger 13-16)

The dual potential of fire becomes evident when overconfidence in artistic creation finds destruction in fire in the case of Icarus, who had his wings melted down when he aspired to reach the Sun. All these show that the archetypal symbol provided Yeats and Eliot "with the means of access to all that was eternally recurrent and primeval, to a world beyond the reach of the shallow materialism of the rationalistic man" (The Fire and the Mountain 211). Yeats reiterates the same idea when he says:

"It is only by ancient symbols ... that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement into the abundance and depth of nature"

(Yeats' *Essays* 106)

The primary source of Yeats' fire symbolism must have been Blake. "For the Lord Thy God is a

consuming fire" (Deuteronomy IV: 24; Hebrews XII: 29) was a text often quoted to prove the existence of Hell. But according to Blake, it is Jesus who is "the God of Fire and Lord of Love" (Jesusalam, J.)

The most composite expression of the symbolic values of fire occur in 'Byzantium'. Yeats gives in a picture of the purified soul, "... an image, man or shade/shade more than man, more image than a shade" before he proceeds to show the workings of the purgatorial process:

"At midnight on the emperor's pavement flit  
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel trees lit  
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame."

These are obviously the Purgatorial flames of orthodox Christian symbolism. Dante makes Arnaut Daniel expiate his post life by just such a means:

"Poi sascose nel foco che gli affina  
'Then he stepped back into the fire which  
refines them" (Dante 148).

Eliot quotes the words to emphasize the need for refinement from the wastes of the land (The Waste Land Line 427). According to Wilson, 'flames begotten of flame' has a platonic reminiscence. As per Platonic theories, there were two forms of 'uncreated flame', the higher and the lower fire. These were described by Yeats as 'the bright and beautiful fire of inspiration and the holy spirit' and 'the dark fire of the fierce impersonal energy, or wrath of God". The higher fire is the symbol of beatitude; it is 'God's Holy fire' in which the sages of 'sailing to Byzantium' stand. The lower fire is the symbol of purgation. The Symbolism of five unites "two representatives of eastern and western asceticism". Both Buddha and St. Augustine employ fire as a symbol of the lusts of flesh. By implication, Eliot means that love in the Waste Land is a sterile burning of lust. The Buddha in his 'Fire Sermon' described all things as burning, "The Ery is burning... Burning with the fire of lust". 'The Fire Sermon' is the cardinal turning point of the poem since for the first time, redemption from fire by assertion of the triumph of 'fire' over 'fire'. In the *Four Quarters*, the symbols of Eliot's earlier verse are developed on a new way. Here, they are fused with the Herakleitean elements of air, earth, fire and water. Water, air and earth are merely transformation of fire. By a curious paradox, water and fire are one, i.e., water is just fire

in another form. Fire is the agent of 'Divine Law. So, both Yeats and Eliot use the same image to signify the same sense and meaning.

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