

## **An Analysis of Semantic Deviations in T. S. Eliot's Poem *Ash-Wednesday***

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the form and functions of the semantic deviations existent in the language of T.S. Eliot's celebrated poem *Ash-Wednesday*. It is central to Eliot's artistic disposition to richly make use of linguistic absurdities that ultimately leads to the pragmatic and imaginative interpretation of the discourse which is dubbed as the intended sense of the author. Being the integral feature of great poetry, the suspension of dictionary meanings and resort to the figurative interpretation not only imparts plurality of meanings but also marked depth to the character of this poem. Recontextualisation of intertextual references and the use of semantic nonsense are the main source for the violation of the semanticity of sense. The poem under analysis is a long, philosophical, and thoroughly metaphorical entity consisting of various stages of a materialistically constructed persona that is on his way to spiritual evolution as a mystic initiate. Therefore, only the typical chunks of the poem would be selected to make the present research manageable. Geoffrey N. Leech' book *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (1969) would inform this research as a conceptual framework. This study would explain the mechanism of the additional meanings in the poem and also encourage the future researchers in the area.

**Keywords:** T.S.Eliot; Semantic Deviations; Ash-Wednesday; Leech

### **Introduction**

All the forms of great art essentially have the ability to be a site for the infinity of meanings. To achieve this character, art has to lean upon various strategies and techniques that would weave its form in a specific fashion. Verbal parallelism, repetition of various sorts, deviations of register, historical deviations, graphological deviations and grammatical deviations are some important areas to be mentioned in this connection. But generally it is the semantic deviations that are yoked by the literary and lyrical artists to realise the artistic build of their creations. Leech (1969) holds the symbolic aspect of the poetic art is in fact the soul of discourse; "In poetry, TRANSFERENCE

OF MEANING, OR METAPHOR in its widest sense, is the process whereby literal absurdity leads to comprehension on figurative plane"(p.49). In fact, metaphorisation in poetry is a very significant operation that works systematically and productively. Leech explains it in a straightforward and simple way when he says that semantic deviations are the name of literal bizarreness that pushes the reader to grasp it on the no-literal level.

T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pond are marked in making use of banal diction in their poems (Leech, 1969, p.6). but this simplicity is productive in pragmatic sense. In his poem under analysis *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot presents the dilemma of a man whose materialistic instincts again and again stop him from his willed journey towards the locale called the enlightenment of the soul. To describe this complicated, huge and mystic mission of the initiate demands the use of some representational and metaphorical material. For this purpose, Biblical references, mythological references, and philosophical references, are accessed strategically along with the smart use of violation of the dictionary meanings. An important thing in this respect to be mentioned is the use of solid and concrete images to avoid confusion in the given poem. Because the present research is an effort on a small scale therefore the entire text of the lengthy poem is not chosen; only the representative parts of the artistic piece are to be analysed. Leech's renowned seminal book *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (1969) is selected to provide theoretical directions to the current study.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

T.S. Eliot, as a poetic sensibility, aestheticises the agony, distress, funerality of outlook and the neurosis of the modern man of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Having written *The Waste Land* and the famed poems on the miserable life of the age, he moves to compose *Ash-Wednesday* that is normally cast as an attempt of the poet's persona to leave the worldly attractions behind and resort, on the basis of his determined will power, to a spiritual uplift. There are various stages in the six parts of the poem and the long and tedious journey of the initiate where he faces a lot severe tensions caused by the conflict between the material instincts and the spiritual quest. On all these occasions the presence of semantic deviations is observed. The expression 'Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?' that occurs at the start of the poem is an important example of semantic violation as this expression, on semantic level, produces but senselessness and bizarreness. This is an extraordinary use of language, to foreground the given chunk. The expression is a metaphor in which the aged eagle with the energy and desire to stretch its wings works as a source domain and the old poet with a desire to enjoy the mundane joys works as a target domain. The transference of meaning

and sense from source to target domain is well contrived to serve some poetic, aesthetic and artistic purposes. The linguistic stretch of 'The vanished power of the usual reign' also denotes a semantic oddity. Only on the imaginative and pragmatic level, these words are to convey some sense and meanings. Metaphorically, the expression 'Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?' "allies itself to that zone of consciousness where discussion is carried on" (Kenner, 1979, p. 228); 'eagle' is a symbol of worldly rule and power and temptations; 'flex its wings' is the symbol of inordinate desires to relish the juicy joys of "life in time" (Gish, 1981, p. 68); 'usual reign' is the metaphor of common attractions of sensuousness and sensuality, available to the human beings; 'the vanished power', in its metaphoricity, accounts for the past life of senses that the spiritual crusader believes he has left much behind. But the case is not as simple as it seems to be; the mundane self of the climber is pagan in character and wild in force; it is not easy for the rational self to bridle the wild self. Against the willed choice of 'Because I do not hope to turn again' almost every image of the first paragraph of part first- 'vanished power', 'the usual reign', 'this man's gift', 'that man's scope', 'the aged eagle', 'stretch its wings' and 'strive to strive' - pulls. Keeping this phenomenon in mind Bush writes: "Eliot's ambivalent attitude towards desire animates *Ash-Wednesday* from its opening lines" (Bush; 1983: 134).

The reference of the aged eagle belongs to the medieval Christian allegory in which the eagle, when he grows old, tries to regenerate itself by darting into the eye of the sun or the well water (Southam, 1977, p. 114). This reference which in its original context has specific meanings undergoes a change, in its interpretations, when it is used as a linguistic grafting in *Ash-Wednesday*. In the new context it works as a metaphor of secular power. The poet, on the level of rational discourse, makes a resolution not to know again 'the infirm glory of the positive hour', and 'the one veritable transitory power'; he also says that he 'Cannot drink/There, where trees flower, and springs flow'. All the three cited poetic stretches are not the examples of common use of language; these expressions are abnormal arrangements and organizations of the linguistic material to turn the concerned portion of the poem marked and foregrounded. The lexemes 'positive' and 'hour' and then 'infirm' and 'glory' normally do not collocate with each other in English. These unusual co-occurrences of lexemes are called figurative collocations which are used in a discourse in a metaphorical way. The lines 14-15 are semantically self-contradictory; the mystic says that 'springs flow' there but he 'cannot drink' because 'there is nothing again'. This semantically strange expression foregrounds the verse-paragraph, to stir the intended purposes of

the author. Metaphorically, 'the positive hour' stands for the strong commitment to the things of the world; 'the infirm glory' figuratively accounts for unstable and non-durable rapture and grandeur in the life of senses. The joy and glory is temporary in spite of the fact that the commitment of the speaker to the world was strong. In metaphorical sense 'The one veritable transitory power' speaks for the love lady and the power of love which are also temporary and fleeting, in spite of the fact that his desire for them is hot and intense. In implicational aspect, the lines 14-15 suggest that the mystic now does not like to relish the beauties of the worldly pasture because its pasturage is infirm and fleeting in character. He cannot 'drink' here; metaphorically the lexeme 'drink' accounts for the mystic's desire to relish and enjoy the attractions and beauties of eternal life; in brief, he is abandoning the temporary sweetness of "life in time" (Gish, 1981, p.68) and moving forward to get bliss of eternity and timelessness.

Gish (1981) holds that the second part of the poem under discussion is allegorical in character where the mystic feels that his body, in the experience of 'dark night', is swallowed up by some beast (p.75).

Lady, three white leopard sat under a juniper-tree

In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety

On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained

In the hollow round of my skull. And God said

Normally, leopards are taken as the bringer of destruction to human bodies. But in the present context, they work as the agents of purification especially due to their colour (Williamson, 1988, p.173). These leopards are to feed upon 'legs', 'heart', 'liver' and 'that which has been contained/In the hollow round of my skull'. These bodily organs are implicational and non-literal areas in interpretation; legs symbolize bodily and animal strength of the mystic; heart does represent the metaphoricity of mundane emotions, feelings and desires; liver, in metaphoric sense, stands for sex instinct and the material in the hollow skull has the implications of his power of perception and reasoning. In short, the leopards are to attack and devour all those areas that are linked human lust. 'Juniper-tree' reminds us the story of the Bible in which Jezebel's threat pushed Elijah to the head towards the forest to rest under a juniper tree where he was given eatables by God (Southam, 1977, p.115). But in the present poem this reference has different meanings because in the new context it works as a metaphor. Metaphorically, it stands for the blessed environment where the unexpected but solacing and pleasing miracles do take place.

The third part of *Ash-Wednesday* where the mystic soul is wearily climbing the stairs of ascent, above physical desire, is termed as the area of symbolic interpretations (Gardner, 1977, p.118). The clause 'The same shape twisted on the banister' has no referent in the two previous parts of the poem. This shape might be the metaphor of the mystic's "sensual self" that is making an effort to be foregrounded in spite of "the soul's willed choice" (Gish, 1981, p.78) to have a break with it. The lexemes 'vapour' and 'fetid air' in 'Under the vapour in the fetid air' symbolize the detestable and stinking secular/temporal images that appear and emerge to a mystic climber who on the basis of his rational commitment is determined not to go back rather to move on; because the past is 'beyond repair'. The lines 100-101 are again an example of poetic irrationality and puzzling text; the 'shape' which implies only a pose of things, not a human being, is 'struggling with the devil'. 'Shape' and 'struggling' do not suit each other, in normal use of language, as 'struggling' demands a living thing which shape is not. Again 'the devil of the stairs' produces linguistic absurdity because, normally, 'devil' does not co-occur with 'the stairs'. Further, the expression 'the deceitful face of hope and of despair' also tends to be metaphor in organization and arrangement of its linguistic material. All the above cited examples are not common use of language. It is a marked and clever use of linguistic items and syntax, not only to foreground the concerned part of the poem, but it is also well contrived to serve some artistic purposes. Their literal bizarreness compels the reader to move onto the pragmatic and imaginative level of understanding things. 'The devil of the stairs', through implications, is associated with the demon of doubt or Satan who "often comes to those who have experienced the dark night of the senses and now must undergo that final and terrible night of the spirit" (Gish, 1981, p.78). The demon of doubt is inseparable from the spirit of belief; the soul is now struggling with this demon of doubt that deceives it with alternate hope and despair, certainty and uncertainty.

The lines 'damped, jagged, like an old man's mouth driveling, beyond repair/Or the toothed gullet of an aged shark' do not convey meanings, on the semantic level. To explain 'the dark stair' concretely, Eliot used these puzzling images which produce a lot of horror and terror on the mind of the reader. On the figurative level, they stand for different types of chosen signs and symbols to represent ugliness in its worst form. Rajan (1976) thinks that the deformed shape of human face is the monster of sensual self that is not giving up a chase to the committed mystic (p.62). The second turning at the second stair is a psychological state of the climber where utmost

darkness symbolizes 'sheer self-disgust'; where everything is rotting, decaying, ageing, losing meaning drastically, odd, and shocking.

The expressions 'made cool the dry rock' and 'made firm the sand' further present examples of semantic confusion and poetic irrationality. 'In blue of larkspur' and 'blue of Mary's colour' also do not satisfy the reader, on the semantic level. All these linguistic absurdities and semantic confusions are resolved properly when these above said abnormal usages of language are carried on the metaphorical and pragmatic level. The 'blue' colour and 'larkspur' are the symbol of the sympathies and kindness of the nun-like figure of the part IV. The presence of this blessed figure renews the life of the fountains and springs, in spiritual terms; to make sand firm and make dry rock cool, metaphorically, stands for the life giving gestures of the blessed lady to the things which were commonly thought incapable of spiritualization and rejuvenation.

In the line 'Who walked between the violet and violet', the lexeme 'Who' refers, implicationally, to the serene figure of a woman who is central in this part of the poem. 'Who' is the metaphor of spiritual blessing, spirit of the vision and heavenly help to the mystic who is requesting, in humility and in the intoxication of his trust in Lord, thus: 'Lord, I am not worthy/but speak the word only'. Wearing the 'blue' and 'white' colours she goes among the ranks of 'violet' and 'green' flowers. The semantic aspect of these flowers and colours does not find importance and meanings here because the scene is of the 'mystic vision' and not that of a natural landscape. In fact these four colours are the graces or worshipable qualities of the lady. The lexeme 'walked' which refers to 'Who', metaphorically, refers to the blessed presence which is dynamic in character; on the move, to bless and spiritualize the requesting and deserving human souls.

Like other sections of the poem under investigation, part V is also full of metaphorical expressions that are realised through linguistic absurdities. The opening lines of the section badly fail to communicate semantically. The expressions 'If the lost word is lost' and 'if the spent word is spent' are two important examples of semantic confusion and literal complexity. To label / conclude 'the lost word' as 'lost' and 'the spent word' as 'spent' does not convey any vivid sense. These foregrounded expressions are understood properly when brought to the imaginative

interpretations. The lexeme 'word', implicationally, stands for "the revelation of God" (Williamson, 1988, p.180) which is ignored by the humans; therefore, it seems to appear 'lost' and 'spent'. But it is only a misunderstanding. The 'word' is a timeless and everlasting thing; it cannot be called 'lost' or 'spent'. In fact the poetic expression, here, is the metaphor of "a sense of time lost and time misspent" (Gardner, 1968, p.121). The revelation of God is a 'word' which can be 'read' only, God does not speak 'word' or revelation; therefore, no one has ability to listen it. This 'word' is 'unheard' and 'unspoken'; and it is still in the world. It can never be 'lost' or 'spent'. Though the world did not honour the Word (Christ) but it is still in the world.

Lines 166-167 exemplify apparent linguistic nonsense. In the line 'No time to rejoice for those who walk among the noise and deny the voice', the verb 'walk' occurs along with 'among noise' which is not a normal collocation of English. In the same way, the noun phrase 'the voice' is a semantic oddity as it does not convey the clear semantic sense. These semantic absurdities, which are not the common use of language, are realised first to arrest the attention of the reader and then place them at figurative level so that their artistically communicative sense is unfolded. Non-literally, the line tells us about the modern souls who spend their lives in the loud and mechanical noisy activities of the modern era and who 'deny' to recognize the teachings and truths of the religion. 'Voice' and 'noise' turn into opposites of each other and the former-Christ- is not be found in the atmosphere predominated by the later-worldly struggle (Drew, 1950, p.144).

The last part of the poem consists of some very beautiful instances of semantic oddities. The following lines present testimony to the claim.

From the wide window towards the granite shore  
The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying  
Unbroken wings

'The wide window' works as a metaphor for a huge worldly urge of a natural man. The persona is trying to move from the worldly self, 'the granite shore', to the path of spiritual evolution but the success is comprehensive. It is only the rational self that is in struggle, the intuitional self does not make progress. The 'unbroken wings' of the worldly ambitions continue to fly (Bush, 1983, P. 152). The white sails which are 'seaward flying' are figuratively the human lusts and desires moving towards the 'life in time', on the implicational level. The wide window, an alliteration, suggestively points to the hugeness of materialistic man's tilt towards the gravitational pull of materiality of life (Rajan, 1976, P. 68).



The concluding two lines of the poem *Ash-Wednesday* are distinguished and singularized with reference to their metaphoricity: 'Suffer me not to be separated/And let my cry come unto Thee'. The first part of this prayer is an Eliotique version of 'Soul of Christ' which is a hymn under the Roman Catholic Church (Southam, 1977, p. 118). This religious reference has its own specific meanings and importance in the original context but in *Ash-Wednesday*, in the changed and new context, its meanings undergo an obvious change; here it works as a metaphor. In the new context, the above said words do not stand for the prayer of the persona who is coming close to the church rather they symbolise the desperate cry turned prayer of a man who is being dragged forcibly away from the church (Rajan, 1976, p. 70).

### Conclusion

The present study concludes that there are various significant manifestations of semantic deviations in the form and language of T.S. Eliot's poem *Ash-Wednesday*. To deal with the thematic content of the poetic piece, the identification and dissection of semantic violations prove hugely useful. Time and again the researcher encounters the nonsensical linguistic material that blocks the semantic flow and then directs his attention to take it up on the metaphorical level. This process is a migration from semanticity to metaphoricity to the text intelligible. Though, the mystic initiate is willed to move to the spiritual realm but his gaze remains fixed upon the materiality of life. It is only the rationality of his personality that is pushing him forward; his intuition self is repeatedly interrupted by the worldly attraction while on the path of spiritual up gradation. This analysis also is useful in so many ways. It explains how the poetic art of T.S. Eliot works; it clarifies and foregrounds the heavy ordeals and hardships that the persona has to face in his struggle; it also proves that the role of the symbolic dimension is certainly overriding in the poetic piece. This study also concludes that, no doubt, T.S. Eliot has composed many quotable and remarkable poems on his concept of the materialised modern man but the poem under discussion is not less relevant in this regard. This research would encourage the future researchers on poets like T.S.Eliot to come forward to analyse their poetry.



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